



NUNC COGNOSCO EX PARTE



TRENT UNIVERSITY  
LIBRARY

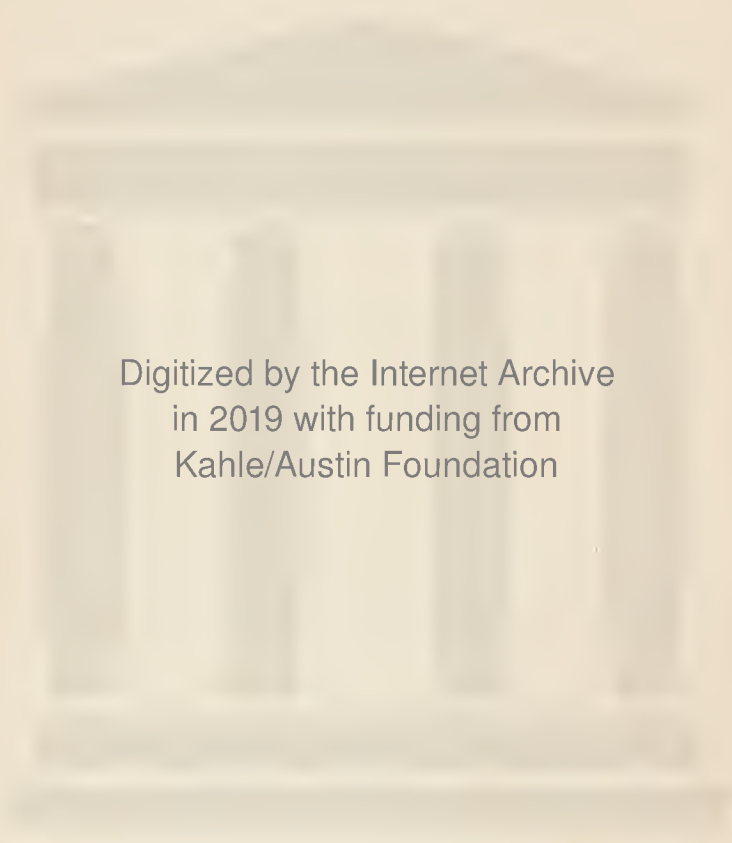
PRESENTED BY

Prof. S.G.D. Smith









Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2019 with funding from  
Kahle/Austin Foundation

Brunetière's Essays in French Literature





BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS  
IN  
FRENCH LITERATURE

A SELECTION  
TRANSLATED BY D. NICHOL SMITH

*WITH A PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR*  
*Specially Written for this, the Authorised English Translation*

London  
T. FISHER UNWIN  
PATERNOSTER SQUARE

1898

PQ 139 .B65

*[All rights reserved.]*

## P R E F A C E

THE few essays, selected from many others to form the present volume, have this in common, that all aim more or less at the determination of the 'essential character' of French literature. I use this word in the sense it bears in natural history, and the 'essential character' of a literature is that which separates it or distinguishes it from all other literatures.

In truth, a great literature, such as the French or the English, so old, so rich, so diverse, and with each successive epoch showing such differences, cannot well accept a single formula and allow itself to be imprisoned, as it were, within its narrow bounds. We must always beware of formulæ, and perhaps nowhere

## PREFACE

more so than in history or in literature, in which we usually preserve the recollection only of what is the exception. The world knows only one Dante and one Shakespeare, and this is the very reason why they are Shakespeare and Dante. In the same way if certain traits suggest a definition of the genius of Bossuet, for example, this is the reason why they cannot express the genius of Molière. And so at first sight nothing seems more futile than to try to include Molière and Bossuet in a common definition.

But when, instead of comparing them only among themselves, we compare them with others, and especially with foreigners,—the author of the *École des Femmes* with that of the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, and Bossuet with the learned Tillotson,—the family likeness which had escaped us becomes evident.

Facies non omnibus una  
Nec diversa tamen.

## PREFACE

It is therefore in no wise futile to aim at detecting, at grasping, at fixing this family likeness. It becomes more definite, when, not content with having fixed it, we analyse it. And it is at last determined if we widen the field of comparison, and, instead of confining ourselves to the work of a few writers, apply ourselves to a whole epoch, a whole century, or the entire history of a whole literature. However much they differ, French writers resemble each other much more than they resemble English writers.

This is what I have endeavoured to show in the following *Essays*.

My object has been to point out that, of all the great modern literatures, French literature, which is much nearer the Latin than the Greek, has had as its 'essential character' a constant tendency, an original aptitude, for *sociability*. Few Frenchmen have written for themselves, for themselves alone, to assume

## PREFACE

the position of opposition, as the philosophers say ; but their ambition has been to please, in the noblest sense of the word, to contribute by their writing to the improvement or to the comfort of civil life, or to displease, when they have dared to do so, in a manner yet pleasant. Or, in other words, if literature has anywhere been the expression of society, it is in France ; and this is the reason of the fecundity, renewed from age to age by the very changes of society ; of the universality, the acknowledged clearness, since authors have endeavoured to make themselves accessible to everybody ; of some of the weaknesses too, on which in this *Preface* I may be allowed not to insist.

No more need I insist on the interest of this investigation. Criticism and literary history are not sciences, nor even 'scientific,' but they may yet avail themselves of scientific methods, and in a certain measure they can, like science,

## PREFACE

aim at discovering or formulating *laws*. If it is quite clear that they can succeed in this only by disengaging from the profound study of works the common elements which are always found in those of the most particular or individual nature, the determination of the 'essential character' of schools, of epochs, of a whole literature, is one of the methods which are naturally suggested. This I hope will appear sufficiently clear in these *Essays*. And if, in addition, by reason of this sociability which seems to me to be the characteristic of French literature, I have provided English readers with new themes of interest, I hope they will not be disappointed, and I shall be exceedingly pleased.

F. B.





## NOTE BY THE TRANSLATOR

THE following essays are selected from three of the series of M. Brunetière's collected works—*Études critiques sur l'histoire de la littérature française* (Volumes III., IV., and V.), *Questions de critique*, and *Essais sur la littérature contemporaine*. As M. Brunetière has kindly given his assistance in the selection of them, the volume may reasonably be considered the author's epitome of a portion of his best work.

It is sometimes said that M. Brunetière's work cannot be translated; and, indeed, it is of so individual a nature, and derives so much of its value from its qualities of style, that it must lose considerably by being rendered in another language. Rhetorical

## NOTE BY THE TRANSLATOR

writing, and French rhetoric in particular, always runs the risk of losing its personal note in translation, and leaves the translator in the sorry dilemma of re-fashioning the original past recognition, or of alienating those readers who justly expect good English. It is the old problem ; only in the present case it is aggravated by special circumstances. The extreme importance of the Essays, however, and particularly their suggestiveness, have prompted the attempt to give them an English dress. And, if I am not mistaken, M. Brunetière's translator will always succeed best by inclining to as close a rendering as idiom will permit.

D. N. S.

## CONTENTS

THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTER OF FRENCH LITERATURE	1
THE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN IN FRENCH LITERATURE	28
THE PHILOSOPHY OF MOLIÈRE . . . .	66
VOLTAIRE AND JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU . . . .	134
THE CLASSIC AND ROMANTIC . . . .	168
IMPRESSIONIST CRITICISM . . . .	207
AN APOLOGY FOR RHETORIC . . . .	235



# Brunetière's Essays in French Literature

## THE ESSENTIAL CHARACTER OF FRENCH LITERATURE

### I

ONE is certainly open to the charge of rashness, if not of useless endeavour, in proposing to describe or sum up in a word the essential character of a literature so great, so rich, above all so varied, as the French. What connection, indeed, can be found between a story of the Round Table, as *Le Chevalier au Lion* by Crestien de Troyes, for example, and *Le Maître de Forges*, or *Doit-on le dire?* or some other vaudeville, by Eugène Labiche or by Edmond Gondinet? They differ in every respect, even in the language; and there is a still greater difference between the authors themselves, to say nothing of the times and places. But if, on the plea of defining the essential character of a literature, we began by omitting all its eccentricities, what would be left as the insignificant remainder? What would we have of literary or even of historic

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

value? And would we not, by analysis on analysis, have but reduced the very material of our observations, till we lost it, as it were, by evaporation?

This objection can be easily answered. If it is not absolutely true,—a constant and mathematical truth which may be verified on every occasion,—that a great literature is the adequate expression of the genius of a race, and its history the faithful abridgment of that of a whole civilisation, the contrary is undoubtedly even less true; and though an interval of six or seven hundred years may have made a difference between a *trouvère* of the twelfth century and a vaudevillist of the Third Republic of our days, there is bound to be, all the same, some connection between them. May we not add that—in a Europe, in which, during the last thousand years alone, so many races have mingled and blended, and so many treaties have been made and unmade—it is rather in their literatures than within their frontiers that the great nations of history have awakened to a sense of their individuality? There would be no Italy were there not something common to Dante and Alfieri, no more than there would be a Germany, were there not innate in every German something, even at this day, of Luther. But what decides the question and justifies the search after the essential character of a literature, is the consequences which seem to result from it,—the light which this character, once it is defined, throws in

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

some way or other on the inmost history of a literature, and the knowledge which it gives of the gradual development of the national spirit.

Let us suppose, by way of example, that the essential character of Italian literature is that of being what may be called an *artistic literature*. This characteristic alone distinguishes it and separates it at once from all the great modern literatures, from the French as well as the German, from the English as well as the Spanish. Works of art are certainly in abundance in these literatures, but there are few which are artistic in motive and by design, few in which their author, like Ariosto or Tasso, aimed only at following poetic caprice or realising a dream of beauty. In this same characteristic, too, are included the secret affinities which Italian literature has always had, as is well known, with the other arts, and notably with painting and music: there is something of Orcagna in the poem of Dante, and when we read the *Jerusalem* or the *Aminta* do we not really feel that we are present at the transformation of the epic into a grand opera? This likewise explains the spell which the same literature wrought on the imaginations of the time of the Renaissance. It was from the Italians that Frenchmen living under Francis I and Henry II, and Englishmen of the time of Henry VIII and Elizabeth, obtained their first feeling for art; and if the appreciation of the personal and intrinsic value

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

of form is not the whole Renaissance, is it not at least its most important part? Who can fail to see also the bearing of this idea of a purely artistic literature on what the Italians once called by the name of *virtu*—which is not *virtue*, which may even be its opposite, but which in any case is, as a naturalist or a logician would say, the *genus* of which *virtuosity* is only a particular *species*? And who consequently can fail to see in what manner, and how quickly, the definition of the essential character of the literature leads us insensibly to the knowledge of the Italian character itself?

Let us take another example and say that the essential character of Spanish literature is that of being a *literature of chivalry*. Is it not true that its whole history is illuminated by it as by a ray of light? The epic songs of the *Romancero*, stories of adventure in the style of the *Amadis* or of the *Diana* of Montemayor, the dramas of Calderon or Lope de Vega, the *Physician of His Honour* or *Mudarra the Bastard*, mystic treatises and picaresque novels, the *Castle of the Soul* or *Lazarillo de Tormes*,—we recognise the bond of connection between all these diverse works, their family characteristic, the hereditary trait which testifies their common origin, this Castilian *pundonor*, whose exaggeration, now sublime and now grotesque, moves with almost pleasing unconcern, as in the story of the *Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance*, to the extremes of devotion and folly. If



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

in our modern Europe, political and industrial, utilitarian and positivist, we have not yet entirely lost the sense of chivalry, we are for this indebted to Spanish literature: and it would not be difficult to prove that it is this literature which has preserved for us all that deserved to survive of the spirit of the Middle Ages. I cannot believe that this remark would be useless to a closer knowledge and fuller understanding of Spanish literature, of its historic rôle, and of the genius of Spain itself.

The essential character of French literature is more difficult to determine. Not that in itself our literature is more *original* than any other, nor richer in great works or in great men. Nothing more impertinent could be asserted; and if the Spaniards have no Molière and the English no Voltaire, we, in our turn, have no Cervantes and no Shakespeare. But French literature is undoubtedly the most abundant and the most voluminous, not to say the most fertile, of all modern literatures. It is the oldest of them, and we can recall, without vanity, that neither Dante in Italy nor Chaucer in England concealed what they owed, the one to our troubadours and the other to the anonymous authors of our old fabliaux. Is it not also the most industrious, the most receptive, one might say—the literature which has always been, no matter what may be said, the most inquisitive about foreign literatures, the most largely inspired by them, the least scrupulous in “turning them into blood and nourish-

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

ment"? Ronsard is almost an Italian poet; and Corneille, with the nature of a Norman, is almost a Spanish tragedian, for when it is neither Calderon nor Lope de Vega that he follows, it is Seneca or Lucan, and both of these were from Cordova. We have also prose writers, such as Diderot, who have been discussed for the last hundred years and more, as "the most German" or "the most English" of our countrymen. And in a short time, if we are not careful, we, in Paris, will be reading only Russian novelists, like Goncharoff or Chedrine, as we shall be going to see only absurdly Scandinavian melodramas, like *The Wild Duck* or *The Lady from the Sea*. Let us add that whether international or cosmopolitan in such a sense, French literature is also so in this, that no other has had the honour of attracting more strangers: Italians, from Brunetto Latini, the master of Dante, to Galiani, the friend of our encyclopædists; Englishmen, such as Hamilton and Chesterfield; Germans above all, such as Leibnitz and the great Frederick. It is all this that makes French literature so diverse; but it is all this too that makes it so difficult to characterise in a single word.

---

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

### II

IF, however, rather than defining our literature by its qualities of order and clearness, of logic and precision, of elegance and good breeding, the enumeration of which is now almost a commonplace, we were to say that it is essentially *sociable* or *social*, we would not perhaps express the whole truth, but, if I am not mistaken, we would not be far from it. Prose writers, and even poets, from Crestien de Troyes, whom we have just mentioned, to the author of *Les Humbles* and *Les Intimités*, M. François Coppée; from Froissart or Commynes to the author of the *Esprit des Loix* or of the *Essai sur les Mœurs*,—scarcely one in France has written but under the eye of society, and without distinguishing the expression of his thought from a consideration of the public to whom he appeals, and, consequently, the art of writing from that of pleasing, persuading, and convincing. “Even the poets of Greece,” said Bossuet, somewhere, “who were in the hands of the whole people, *instructed rather than diverted*. The most renowned of heroes looked on Homer as a master who taught him how to reign well. This great poet taught no less how to obey well *and to be a good citizen*. He and so many other poets, whose works are no less grave than pleasing, *celebrated only the arts that are useful to human life, and proclaimed only the public good, fatherland, society, and that admirable*

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

*civility which we have just explained.*" May we not think that in so defining the essential character of Greek literature—though he viewed it from too high a standpoint, and without adequate regard of the comedies of Aristophanes and the epigrams of the *Anthology*—Bossuet unconsciously defined at the same time his own literary ideal? In any case, what he says of Æschylus and Sophocles is no less true of Corneille and Voltaire—Voltaire, who may be justly said to have spoiled the drama by this very desire to "celebrate the arts that are useful to human life"; and if I had any doubts that this desire was the soul of our literature, the number and diversity of the facts explained thereby would suffice to convince me.

In this way, then, the qualities above mentioned—order and clearness, logic and precision, severity in composition and good-breeding in style—are all connected with it, or rather depend on it, as so many effects of one and the same cause. If what is not clear is not French, the reason for it is not to be sought in the native character of the language or in any other secret virtue. Our vocabulary and syntax, reduced to their essential elements and considered in themselves, do not differ so much from the syntax and vocabulary of Spanish and Italian. They have the same origin, and, in more than one respect, the same evolution. But while in Spain and Italy, writers, and poets above all, have endeavoured to make their language more voluptuous and tender, or more

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

sounding and beautiful, not even shrinking from the extremes of Gongorism or Marinism, but rather throwing themselves into these with all their soul, in France, on the other hand, our writers in general, and our prose writers in particular, have aimed only at making themselves the more easily understood, and at becoming accordingly, with each successive work, more simple, clear, and lucid.

On this point, Rivarol, in his celebrated *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française* makes an ingenious and profound remark. "Study the translation of the ancient authors into modern tongues. Thanks to the facility which almost all the other languages have of modelling or *moulding* themselves on Latin or Greek, they give a faithful rendering, even of the obscurities of their original, and the meaning is at last fully recovered, but at the outset it was lost with the original. On the contrary, a French translation is always an *explanation*." This could not be better said, and the only criticism that I here pass on Rivarol is that he tries to find in the character of our language a reason which seems to me rather to be implied in our authors' conception of their art. It is out of regard to the reader, and, as Bossuet said, from "civility,"—if it is from a desire to render themselves accessible to all, and not merely to compatriots, but even to foreigners,—that our writers of the seventeenth century disencumbered French phraseology of the learned Greek and Latin mannerisms,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

by which it was embarrassed, burdened, and fettered. Similarly, in the following century, if the quicker and smarter and simpler phrase of Voltaire is generally substituted for the fuller and richer and more organic phrase of Pascal and Bossuet, it is still by way of "civility," in order to reach, as could easily be shown, new and less educated classes of readers and to instruct them. And similarly still, in our day, if romanticists have vindicated the right of using, in prose as in verse, a vocabulary less "noble" and "select," and accordingly more popular, than that of the classicists, where is the reason to be found but in this "civility," which they sometimes seem to have violated only to appeal in their turn to a public less "select" and "noble," and consequently more numerous, than that of Voltaire and Pascal.

The first and principal object, then, of our great writers, in all times, has been to make themselves be read. It is not the universality of the French language that has brought about, or merely prepared, the universality of the literature, but, on the contrary, it is the universality of the literature that has caused the universality of the French language. Civilised Europe has not read Rabelais and Montaigne, Voltaire and Rousseau because they were French; it has rather studied French to be able to read Montaigne's *Essays* and Rousseau's *Contrat social*. The consequence is plain enough. If the French language has become clearer and more logical, preciser and more polished

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

than any other, it was not so originally, and had no innate reason for becoming so. All honour in this belongs to our great writers. It is they who have made it such, and they have done so only to make it more fitting to the social rôle or function which they have from all time assigned to literature.

In this manner likewise is to be explained the superiority of our literature in the forms which may be called *common*. I speak of those which can exist only with the participation of the public, and with what may be called the favour of its collaboration. There can be no orator without an audience ; no theatre without a pit ; two, at least, are necessary for letter-writing ; and the moralist must have his salon.

Let us consider in this connection the eloquence of the pulpit. If there has never been, in any language, a preacher more eloquent than Bossuet or more solid than Bourdaloue, the reason of it is that, independent of their personal qualities, none have better understood or developed in their sermons the political and social virtue of Christianity. In quite another department of thought, among our dramatic authors, I can think of only Racine and Regnard who did not pique themselves on correcting or directing manners ; but all the rest, on the other hand, made that their whole aim—Corneille and Molière, Voltaire and Destouches, Marivaux and Beaumarchais, Diderot and Mercier, Dumas and Hugo, the author of the *Lionnes pauvres* and the author of the *Demi-Monde*. Consider,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

also, the masterpieces of the French novel, from Honoré d'Urfé's *Astrée*, to go no further back, to M. Zola's *Germinal*, to descend no further. There are no analyses of states of mind, as in the novels of Richardson or George Eliot. What is depicted is the manners of the society of the time. The good French novels—with the exception of *Adolphe* or *René*, which are not novels—are all social pictures. And what shall I say in turn of our great letter-writers, Madame de Sévigné, Madame de Maintenon, Madame du Deffand and Voltaire? How preoccupied they are with society and, as a result, with their neighbours! How they strain to amuse, to instruct, and to please! So far is this carried that a truly private correspondence—like that of Mdlle. de Lespinasse, where the writer thinks only of the interests of her own enthusiasm—surprises us and jars in the history of our epistolary literature. And without their society, without their continual curiosity, without the unmistakable pleasure they have always had in noting the smallest customs, what would our moralists be—La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère, Vauvenargues and Duclos, Chamfort and Rivarol, Stendhal and Joubert? If ever writers could say that they only “give back to the public what they had borrowed from it,” it is they; and this, too, is the reason of their superiority over all those who, in other literatures, have vainly endeavoured to compete with them. Take Addison or Shaftesbury as an illustration.



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

From this method of understanding and treating literature, it has also come about that the purely literary qualities have insensibly widened, so as to include those subjects which from their nature seem the least suitable. From the very fact that our great writers have never separated the idea of their art from that of the interest, the real profit, and the pleasure of the reader, it has happened that everything which may amuse or instruct lies with us within the domain of literature. Thus questions the most abstract, and, by definition, the most remote from common experience, have become, in French, the occasion of masterpieces which may be equalled, in their kind, to the tragedies of Racine or the fables of La Fontaine.

Need any examples be given? The *Provinciales* are only a collection of theological pamphlets. The *Histoire des Variations des Églises protestantes* is only controversial. The *Entretiens sur la Pluralité des Mondes* is only a treatise on Cartesian astronomy. The *Esprit des Lois* is only a compilation of universal and comparative jurisprudence. *Émile* is only a novel on education. I say nothing of the *Histoire naturelle* or the *Contrat social*. Yet what tragedies, by Corneille even, or Hugo, what novels, by Le Sage or Prévost, *Gil Blas* or *Manon Lescaut*, what odes or what elegies have done more, or as much, for the diffusion of French literature and the glory of its name? No, indeed, Buffon said nothing so ridiculous, as some would seem to think, when he advised

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

the writer to "name things only in the most general terms"; and those who still laugh at the precept and the master understand neither. Buffon meant to say that as long as geometricians and physicians, theologians and lawyers, scholars and philologers, in one word, all the specialists, employed only the technical language of their science or their art, so long would they lack that intelligent curiosity, that interest, and that general sympathy which to them are none the less necessary. In other words, he advised them to be men rather than embryologists or Hebraists, and though the advice may cause some inconvenience, who can deny that it is good?

Let us here also touch on the great reasons of the universality of the French language and literature. Twice, at least, in their long history French literature and language have exercised on the whole of Europe a universality of influence which other languages, more harmonious perhaps, like the Italian, and other literatures, more original in certain respects, like the English, have all the same never possessed. It was under a purely French form that our *Chansons de Geste*, our *Stories of the Round Table*, our very fabliaux—whatever be their origin, German or Tuscan, English or Breton, Eastern or Greek—conquered and fascinated and charmed, from one end of Europe to the other, the imaginations of the Middle Ages. The amorous languor and subtlety of our love poetry breathe no less in the madrigals of Shakespeare him-

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

self than in the sonnets of Petrarch ; and after the lapse of so long a time, we still recognise something of ourselves even in the Wagnerian drama, as in *Parsifal* or *Tristan and Isolde*. Much later, in an entirely classical Europe, from the beginning of the seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century, right on for a hundred and fifty years or even more, French literature held sovereign sway in Italy, Spain, England, and Germany. Are not Algarotti, Bettinelli, Beccaria, Filangieri almost French names ? What of the famous Gottsched ? If Lessing triumphed over Voltaire, was it not with the aid of Diderot ? And can Rivarol be accused of national vanity in writing his *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française*, considering that he was half Italian, and that the subject was proposed by the Academy of Berlin ?

All sorts of reasons have been urged for this universality of French literature : we have had statistics, if I may say so, geographical, political, and linguistic. But the true and real reason lies elsewhere : and it is to be found in the eminently social character of the literature. If our great writers are understood and admired by everybody, it is because they address themselves to everybody, or rather because they speak to everybody about everybody's interests. They pay no attention to exceptions or particularities : they wish to treat only of man in general, or, as is still said, of the universal man, held in the bonds of the society of the human being : and

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

their very success is a proof that beneath all that distinguishes an Italian from a German, this universal man, whose reality has been so often doubted, continues to be and to live, and, despite modifications, to remain the same.

Need any proofs be given? How is it that the *Cid* of Guillen de Castro, although it is a fine drama, and it would not be a difficult matter to praise it for certain qualities which are not to be found in the drama of Corneille, has not met with the same European success. The reason is that Guillen de Castro, like a true Spaniard, saw in his subject only its purely heroic side. He did not see what Corneille, on the contrary, brought into such fine prominence—the struggle of Rodrigue's passion with the social law; he exhausted its picturesque interest, but its purely human interest escaped him. How again, in his *Phèdre*, did Racine change the material of the Greek *Hippolytus*? And what is it that Voltaire endeavoured to add in his *Zaïre* by his ill-advised treatment of Shakespeare's *Othello*? As with Corneille, it is a social conflict—the conflict of love and religion, the eminently human drama of *Zaïre*'s hesitations, perplexities, and tortures between what on the one hand she owes to her birth, and what on the other she cannot refrain from giving to her passion.

Therein lies the reason of their world-wide welcome. In the questions they discuss, it is the essential interests of "civility" or of humanity itself which are

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

at stake. As they consider the social institution perhaps the most admirable thing in the world, all their thoughts bear on it, and thus their expression of these thoughts cannot be a matter of indifference to anybody. Who would not be curious to know the extent of a country's duty to its citizens, or a father's to his children, or a husband's to his wife ; how the many conflicts that arise every day between our different duties are decided ; what bias reconciles, or what superior principle unites and blends, instead of opposing or contradicting, the needs of the individual and the rights of society ? It is from being not forced, but consecrated in its entirety, to the examination of these questions that French literature has won universality. It is well to recall this fact to certain Frenchmen who forget it, and to remind them that while there may even be other reasons, this remains the chief.

For I do not deny, let it be understood, that the character of the language may also partly conduce to it, and I have already said so in definite terms. It may reasonably be held that neither the number of a population, which in the seventeenth century was a fifth of the total population of civilised Europe ; nor the privileged situation of France in the centre of the Europe of that time and at the confluence, as it were, of the literatures of the North and South ; nor, in short, its good luck under Louis XIV, and even under Louis XV, to be the model in everything to the court of Charles II of England and to that of Catherine of

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

Russia, failed to favour the diffusion of French ideas and French literature. But these are secondary or rather derived reasons, which would not have acted of themselves, and none of which would have assured the universality of French literature, since none of them at other times assured the universality of Spanish or German literature. Though the Germans now number almost fifty millions, is their literature thereby more widely diffused? Are German novels more read? Are German dramas more acted? Is it not always French novels that are shown in the booksellers' windows of Vienna and Berlin, of Rome and Naples? One might as well seek the reasons of the universality of French literature in the political action of France, as the reasons of Voltaire's popularity in his incredulity, or of Hugo's glory in his political opinions. And again, even this would still lead us back to the same conclusion, for it would still lead us back to the eminently *practical* or *pragmatical*, and consequently *social* character of their prose and verse.

And may not that very character, which explains the rarest qualities of French literature, be held likewise to account for its faults or its defects? The long inferiority of our lyric poetry is undoubtedly an eloquent example. If the Pléiade failed in its generous enterprise; if Ronsard and his friends left behind them only a reputation which, from a literary point of view, is dubious and always contested; if for two hundred and fifty or three hundred years there

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

was nothing more inane than a French ode or elegy,—nothing more meagre under the false brilliance of its mythological adornment, and nothing more cold,—it is not Boileau or Malherbe who is to be blamed for it, but only the force of events : and the truth is that in obliging literature to fulfil, so to speak, a social function, in requiring the poet to conform his manner of thinking and feeling to the ordinary manner, in refusing him the right to put himself into his work, or merely to let himself appear in it, the living springs of lyricism had been dried up or shut off. French literature has thus paid by its too manifest inferiority in the forms which may be called “personal” for its superiority in the forms which are “common.” To make itself accessible to everybody, it had to submit to the principle of depriving itself of the expression of sentiments, not merely too rare, but only too particular. It likewise denied itself all that local detail or special accent could give to the expression of the general sentiments of the most private and individual being, for fear of including in its descriptions or analyses some elements which were not the same in all time and in every place. The predominance of the *social* character, and the subordination to it of all the others, reduced the personal manifestation to what could be contained in the *proprie communia dicere* of the Latin poet : and we have had our Æschylus and Sophocles, our Demosthenes and Cicero, but no Pindar, nor even a Petrarch or a Tasso. It would be more diffi-

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

cult to say why, too, we have not had a Homer or a Dante, an Ariosto, or a Milton.

Is it for this that French literature has sometimes been accused of lacking depth and originality? I do not intend to examine if, in this accusation, depth is confounded with obscurity. I only believe that our great writers affect somewhat the men of the world, or of the court, to cloak, or rather to disguise this depth, while certain Germans, on the other hand—of the school of Hegel or of the famous Jean-Paul—readily inform us what they have endeavoured to put into their works. The Frenchman piques himself on speaking clearly about matters which are sometimes profound, but the German seems to glorify himself too often on stating obscurely matters which are clear. Is Kant really more profound than Pascal, and Fichte than Rousseau? Fichte and Kant, absorbed as they are in slow elaboration, in the consideration and, if I may say so, the proud satisfaction of their own thought, leave their readers the trouble of finding it out, while Pascal and Rousseau spare them such trouble. This is still, evidently, the effect of the same cause. The German is satisfied if he understands himself, and in proportion to the difficulty which others have in understanding him, does he find proof of the depth of his thought. The Frenchman would think that he had failed in his aim if the reader could understand him only with effort, and he prefers to pass for superficial rather than for obscure.



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Should it not be added that, in a literature eminently *social* like the French, where the interests which are discussed are by definition the interests of humanity itself, the opportunities of being profound, in the philosophic sense of the word, are naturally less frequent than in a literature like the German, where the great pretension of the writer is to attain to the *noumena* of everything. For a useful discussion of the question of toleration, or that of the sovereignty of the people, there is need of less equipment—if, for that matter, there is need of as much penetration—and consequently there are fewer chances of astonishing and surprising than in the treatment of the question “how the Ego and the Non-ego, placed in the Ego by the Ego, are limited reciprocally.” A Frenchman would have put it in a simpler manner, but, as is evident, he would have appeared less profound. Would he have merely put the question? And since we can very well separate ourselves from our environment, would he not rather have left the problem to the universities as one of no practical utility? What more is to be said but that, according as French literature merits the reproach of lacking depth, it is reproached, as it were, for not being German literature? A very German reproach this!

I should have to say almost the same of its so-called want of originality, which I do not combat either, but explain by further reference to this same *social*

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

character. A man may well live, if he wishes, outside of and on the margin, as it were, of the society of other men, although for that matter it may be rather difficult. He may withdraw, in some way or other, from the circle of his fellow creatures, like Byron or Shelley. And he may, if he wishes, act in bold opposition to customs and received opinions. But if, on the other hand, he wishes to live in society, and for society—which is undoubtedly permitted and really even ordered—he must begin by submitting himself to its customs and opinions, since this is really the only way to modify them. Men are not to be persuaded against their prejudices. And just as we begin, so as to make ourselves masters of nature, by obeying its laws, the knowledge of which gives us the means of escaping from them, so, and with stronger reason, we can triumph over prejudices only as we begin by sharing them. In this way an eminently *social* literature would be always less *original* than a literature whose ideal would tend, like Italian literature of old, only to the realisation of pure beauty, or, like English literature still to this day, to the free manifestation of individual energy. This, if you will, is the weakness or the want of classical French literature. It would be so certainly, if this weakness was not, on the other hand, as I have endeavoured to show, one of the conditions of its strength. We cannot have everything; human affairs are always mixed; and as for deciding, if, among so many con-

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

ceptions of literature, there is one which should be absolutely preferred to others, or to all the others—this would be a very interesting problem, but it does not concern us at present.

---

### III

SHALL I now show the strong light which is thrown by this definition of the essential character of French literature on the obscure parts of its history? The discredit and final neglect into which the “victims of Boileau,” for example, have fallen, to whom may be joined the majority of those of Voltaire: the contradictory judgments that have been so often passed, and are passed still, on the “Société précieuse”: the quarrel of the ancients and moderns, the importance of which has for so long been strangely neglected: the nature of the revolution wrought on the literature of his time by the author of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* and the *Confessions*: the true point of debate in the first years of this century between the classicists and romanticists: all these become clearer and more connected, and order and adjust themselves, when they are referred to the essential character of French literature. If the names of the Théophiles and Saint-Amants are almost unknown, it is because they wished to indulge in “personal literature” at a time when the tendency of writers was

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

eminently *social*, and when, accordingly, there was not that public opinion, without which nobody in France has ever been able to do anything. In like manner what the romanticists claimed was the right of being themselves, of breaking away from the restraints which the recollection of masterpieces of a "purely impersonal literature" imposed on them; and, what is very curious, but very significant, they no sooner obtained this right than they renounced it. In like manner the Protestants, when they won from Rome liberty of thought and belief, hastened to surrender it in the making of separate churches for themselves. But all these questions are only for the literary historian, and this is why I prefer, now that I have alluded to them, to contrast the essential character of French literature—so as to succeed in making it evident of itself—with the essential characters of the German and English.

In comparison with French literature, defined and characterised by its spirit of sociability, English literature is an *individualistic literature*. With the obvious exception of the generation of Congreve and Wycherley, and perhaps also of that of Pope and Addison, to which it must not be forgotten Swift too belonged, the English seem to write only to give themselves the exterior sensation of their individuality. Hence that *humour*, which may be defined as the expression of the pleasure which they feel in thinking only after their own way. Hence the abundance, the richness,

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

the amplitude of the lyric vein, if *individualism* is precisely its source, and if an ode or an elegy is as the involuntary flow and overflow of what is most hidden and secret and personal in the soul of the poet. Hence also the *eccentricity* of their great writers in comparison with the rest of the nation, as if in truth they recognised their own personality only in opposing themselves to those who seem most like them. Can we not name other characteristics of English literature? This I shall not venture to answer: all I say here is that I do not know how to express better the differences which separate it from ours.

This, also, is all that I intend to do in saying that the essential character of German literature is that of being *philosophic*. Their philosophers are poets, and their poets philosophers. Goethe is to be seen no more, and no less, in his *Theory of Colours* or his *Metamorphoses of Plants* than in his *Divan* or his *Faust*; and lyricism, if I may here use this proverbial expression, "floods its banks" in the theology of Schleiermacher and the philosophy of Schelling. Perhaps this may be one at least of the reasons of the mediocrity of the German drama? It is evidently the reason of the depth and reach of Germanic poetry. Even in the masterpieces of German literature there may be said to be something confused, or rather mysterious, suggestive in the highest degree, something which leads to the thought by the intermediary of the dream. Who has not been struck, despite the barbarous termin-

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

ology, with the fascinating and eminently poetical qualities, at once realistic and ideal, in the great systems of Kant and Fichte, Hegel and Schopenhauer? Assuredly there is nothing more widely separated from the character of our French literature. We come to understand what the Germans reproach us with, when they reproach us with lacking depth. Let them pardon us in our turn if we do not reproach their literature with not being ours!

For it is well that it should be so, and for five or six hundred years it is this that has brought about the greatness, not merely of European literature, but even of western civilisation itself. I refer to what all the great peoples, after slow elaboration in national isolation, have paid back to the common treasury of the human mind. We owe, then, to this last nation the sense of the mysterious, and, so to speak, the revelation of the beauties of the obscure and intangible. To another we owe the sense of art, and what may be called the knowledge of the power of form. A third has transmitted to us what is most heroic in the conception of chivalric honour. And to another, lastly, we owe the knowledge of what is at once fiercest and noblest in human pride, what is most salutary and dreadful. But for us Frenchmen, our rôle has been to connect, to blend, and to unify, as it were, under the idea of the general society of the human race, all these contradictory or hostile elements. All Europe has borrowed our inventions

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

and ideas to appropriate them to the genius of its different races, whether Latin or Romance in origin, Celtic or Gallic, or even Germanic. In reborrowing them, in our turn, and in adopting them when thus transformed, we have asked only to be able to assist in the progress of reason and humanity. We have cleared up their confusion, we have cured their canker, we have generalised their particularities, we have humanised their excess. Have we not also sometimes lessened the greatness or alloyed the purity? If Corneille has made the still somewhat barbarous heroes of Guillen de Castro liker ourselves, has not La Fontaine, in imitating the author of the *Decameron*, made him grosser than he is in his own tongue; and if the Italians cannot accuse Molière for what he has borrowed from them, the English have the right to complain that Voltaire little understood Shakespeare. But it is no less true that—by distinguishing from the individual man of the North or of the South that idea of a universal man, for which we have been so much blamed—if any modern literature has uniformly proclaimed “the public good and civility,” it is French literature. And this ideal cannot be so futile as has been too often supposed, since, as I have endeavoured to show, from Lisbon to Stockholm, from Archangel to Naples, it is this which foreigners have been pleased to find manifest in the masterpieces, or rather in the entire range of the history of our literature.

## THE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN IN FRENCH LITERATURE\*

ALTHOUGH the books whose titles we give below are very unequal in merit, and do not address themselves to the same public, they have, at least, this point in common, that they deal with the history of polite society, and bring up once again the question of the influence of women in the vicissitudes of French literature. From “la très sage Héloïs” and Marie de France, who lived in the thirteenth century, to Madame de Staël and George Sand, how many women authors have written without effect—I mean to say without becoming models for the women, and even for the men, who have come after them, and without, consequently, inoculating the French spirit with some of the bad as well as the good qualities of their sex? Even those who did not write, and

\* I. *Les Mœurs polies et la Littérature de cour sous Henri II*, par M. Édouard Bourciez. Paris, 1886 ; Hachette.—II. *Histoire des femmes écrivains de la France*, par M. Henri Carton. Paris, 1886 ; Dupret.—III. *Choix de lettres de femmes célèbres, depuis le xvi<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à nos jours*, par un professeur de l'Université. Paris, 1886 ; Delalain.—IV. *Les femmes de France prosateurs et poètes*, morceaux choisis par M. P. Jacquinet. Paris, 1886 ; Belin.



## ESSAYS IN FRENCH LITERATURE

have left only a name, or at the very most a débris of correspondence, but who have none the less been vaunted for their wit and grace, and whose power was none the less real, how did they exercise this power, and for whose benefit or disadvantage? This is what we ask ourselves on reading this *Choix de lettres de femmes célèbres* and this *Recueil de morceaux choisis*, in which M. Jacquinet and a "university professor," by a gallant innovation, and as happy as gallant, have made only women figure. It is this question which M. Henri Carton's book on *Les femmes écrivains de la France* should answer, and would answer, did it not absolutely fail to fulfil the promise of its title. It is this, too, which we in our turn should now like to examine.

To be treated with the fulness it deserves, this subject would demand a whole volume, or more, for it is nothing less than the history of French literature treated with a certain bias and viewed in a certain perspective. Although we know nothing of the *ruelles* and *salons* of the time of the Crusades, and though the French court, for women as for men, was, till the time of Louis XII and Francis I, just the personal retinue of the king, yet the Middle Ages had their women historians and poets; nor is there, from the first, any interruption in their line of succession. In proof of this, nothing would be easier than to name offhand twenty, thirty, or even a hundred authoresses, whom M. Jacquinet, in his *Collection*, and M. Carton, in his *History*, have not even mentioned. Such, for

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

example, are Madame du Noyer, Madame Nouvellon, Madame Patin, Madame Pringy, Madame de Louven-court, Madame Moussart, Madame Durand, Madame Vatry, Madame de Gomez, Mademoiselle Masquière, Madame du Hallay, Mademoiselle de La Force, Madame de Murat, and Madame d'Aulnoy, who all lived from 1680 to about 1725, a short but very obscure period of our literary history, and many of whom, I am sure, would not be unworthy of having "Extracts" made from their works. And as for those who did print, whether or not we add those who, without being authors, aimed at protecting or influencing literature, we could easily lengthen the already long list which Somaize has given in his *Dictionnaire des Précieuses* for a single half of the seventeenth century. If other literatures have not wanted women authors, the succession has not been so regular, nor the tradition so constant, as with us; and a literary history of the women of France would trace, almost year by year, the very history of our national literature. Though we cannot here make any pretence to write, or even to sketch it, we can still try to show how we understand it, and to indicate roughly in what way the influence of women has affected our literature.

We do not need to go further back than the sixteenth century. We have not a sufficient knowledge, either of the literature or of the habits of the Middle Ages. On the one hand we can find nothing in any literature more gross, more brutal, and less refined

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

than our old fabliaux, while on the other hand we are unable to explain, without the influence, the example, and the authority of women, the prodigious success of the poetic and even mystic stories of the Round Table ; but what we are unable to understand, what, at least, I humbly admit I cannot, is the connection, or relation of so much ribaldry with so much delicacy, of the first part of the *Roman de la Rose* with the second. No doubt chronology, ethnography, and philology will explain it to us some day ; they will distinguish with perfect precision what we mix up and confuse : but, in the meantime, neither can we distinguish it with sufficient certainty, nor can they explain it with sufficient assurance. Our scholars have done much for the literature of the Middle Ages, but in the histories which they have given us they have as yet forgotten to advance any theories, and have made catalogues rather than histories. I shall add, no matter how little it be their opinion, that if they have established anything, it is that there are two histories of French literature, just as there are two French literatures,—the one beginning with the tenth century and ending with the fourteenth, and the other being *reborn*, or born, in the sixteenth and continuing to our day. The first has its own value, and the study of it is interesting, but it is useless to a knowledge of the second ; the interval between them was too long, the separation too profound, the very revolution of the language too complete and radical.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

If we are wrong in judging the *Chansons de Geste* and the *Fabliaux* with a taste which has been formed by familiarity with the classics of the seventeenth century, we commit no less an error, nor one less dangerous, in attempting to judge a tragedy of Racine or a comedy of Molière from the point of view of the Middle Ages. And this is why, even though we regret it, we need not go back to the Middle Ages in search of the origins of the modern politeness of manners, language, and style.

It would be more useful, and even indispensable—so at least it has long been held—to go back to the sixteenth century. This is what M. Édouard Bourciez has recently done in a very interesting book: *Les Mœurs polies et la Littérature de cour sous Henri II.* I am not going to criticise this book here, and provisionally I shall adopt its conclusions. Whatever the influence then which women undoubtedly had at the court of the princes of the house of Valois—and though some of them, too, are plainly more than emancipated from the old servitude—still it does not appear that they had the power to direct the current of public opinion or even to go against it; and, generally, they followed it. Neither Rabelais, nor Calvin, nor Montaigne, nor so many others, and these are precisely the greatest, seems to have undergone the influence of the women of the time, nor to have revolted against it, which, of course, is just another way of undergoing it. Perhaps they think

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

with Erasmus "that woman is an absurd and ridiculous animal, *though entertaining and pleasant*; . . . that Plato was right in asking if she should be classed as a reasonable creature, or left among the species of brutes; . . . and that as an ape is always an ape, so a woman, no matter what part she plays, remains always a woman, that is to say silly and foolish." I am quite willing to believe them capable of it. But, whatever they think, it never comes into their head that if woman is a creature she can have a character, that she can claim her share in the occupations of men, and much less, consequently, that she can conceive the idea of leading, directing, or ruling them. Our French literature of the sixteenth century is still quite virile, without any alloy of feminine qualities, not only devoid of modesty and taste, but, it must be said, of shame, and as such it is hardly French, but, on the other hand, at once truly Gallic and Latin.

This fact may lead us to ask the question if the troubles which filled the second half of the sixteenth century, the civil wars and the foreign wars, had not, by imposing on the women themselves other virtues than those of their sex, stifled, as it were, the awakening spirit of society, and, consequently, politeness of manners and elegance of speech. Even at the court of her brother, the first Margaret, the sister of Francis I, would have liked (according to the later phrase) to direct the affairs of taste. So too Mary Stuart, had fortune permitted it,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

and had she not been forced too soon to leave the court of France for her misty Scotland. It has been truly said that this dynasty of the house of Valois "which the political historian has the right to reproach severely, created the brilliant side of French civilisation, and powerfully contributed to found our supremacy in point of elegance and taste"; and what is true of its first princes is perhaps still more true of its last. Francis I did not usurp his title of "Father of Letters"; everybody knows Charles IX's verses to Ronsard; even Henry III prided himself on being a judge in matters of art and taste. Yet, all the same, neither kings nor queens, nor ladies outside their connection, succeeded in the sixteenth century in fixing in a truly stable if not final form what may be called the ideal of the French spirit. And whatever explanations may be given—and these are liberal, as they always are, and innumerable, when the question is why something has not come to pass—the fact is that not till the first year of the seventeenth century do we see the rise of the influence of women and the beginning of the history of polite society.

The judgments of posterity are sometimes odd. As long as the *Précieuses ridicules* shall be acted—that is to say as long as the French language shall endure—so long shall we mock the *Précieuses*, whether true or false, ridiculous or not, of the Hôtel de Rambouillet, and the incomparable Arthénice and Madeleine de Scudéry. Yet it must be recognised that

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

it is to them that the French spirit owes some of the best lessons which it has ever received, and our literature itself, by a consequence which I shall point out, an unmistakeable part of its glory. Molière in mocking them, and, to mock them the better, in exaggerating their absurdities, was attending to his business of dramatic author ; but as for us, it is time now to attend to ours, and not accept a satire as the lasting expression of the judgment of history. In reality, had the *Précieuses* taught us only propriety of language, and not to name on every occasion and before everybody everything by its name, that alone would have been much ; and Molière himself, yes, Molière, without imperilling his glory, would not have done badly, on more than one occasion, to have put himself to their school. Art cannot and must not express what forms, no matter how, the material of everyday occurrence, the vulgar and gross stuff of life, or at least can do so only by transforming it ; and this formula, which is now that of the conversation of respectable people, is at the same time the beginning of the art of writing. All that is done cannot be spoken, all that is spoken in the liberty of private conversation cannot be written ; we must not, like Buffon, put on lace ruffles to appear before the public, but no more must we, like Diderot, choose just this time to put on our dressing gown, much less to take it off ;—and this is the first lesson which the habitués of the *chambre bleue* received of old from the Marquise de Rambouillet.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

How far this lesson was useful is known by all readers, not of Brantôme or Tallemant des Réaux, who are suspicious anecdotists, collectors of scandalous and often calumnious tales, though men of wit for that matter, but by readers of the *Moyen de parvenir*, for example, or, at the height of the seventeenth century, of Saint-Amant, Théophile, or Scarron. In Balzac even there are traits which we would not dare to cite. Ronsard and the Pléiade had endeavoured to draw us out of the rut, but to no purpose: the Gallic element returned, and still kept on appearing, and, mounting to the surface, spread itself in the fulness of its complacent ribaldry. The delicate and subtle allegory of *Astrée*, too long, but so charming in its very roguishness and sentimentality, was answered by the *Histoire comique de Francion*, just as at another time, and in another country, Fielding was to reply by his *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* to the long novels of Richardson. Another was surprised that Madame de Rambouillet would not allow the words of Rabelais's vocabulary to be spoken in her hearing. "This is too much," he said; "we have no more liberty." And once again we would have obeyed our natural tendencies had the *Précieuses* not come to warn and save us from them. They did not meet with immediate success; it was not they who could have made French literature break entirely, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, with the Gallic tradition; and, undoubtedly,



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

this would have been a pity even had it been possible : but all the same they taught us to moderate the flights of a gross fancy, and to make everything pass, as La Fontaine said, with the help of a word, for in France everything must pass. Even those who are Gallic by nature should be thankful to them for all the piquancy that is given by a clever and ingenious disguise to the ideas of certain things.

At the same time that they refined the old Gallic spirit, the *Précieuses* were no less averse to pedantry and bookishness. Smitten with the ancients, intoxicated with Greek and Latin, even our greatest writers of the sixteenth century are pedants, and pedants of the first degree. Rabelais mocks at pedants, and we know with what verve ; but who will deny that he is one of them himself, and that this Gargantua of letters, with the continual display of his encyclopædic knowledge, is as often unendurable as extraordinary ? And what of Ronsard and his disciples, with their pindaric odes, their learned allusions, and their mythology ? And what shall we say of so many others—who sweat their classics, so to speak, through every pore—with whom, like Sorbonne recluses, two verses of Martial or an aphorism of Plutarch take the place of arguments ? They are scholars, and they had to be followed, but they lack a well-bred bearing and the art of pleasing. Again it is women who will give them this, and it is the *Précieuses*. They will teach them that their learning which is only erudition has no

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

importance in itself; that the ancients were natural people and that the best means of resembling them is to imitate them exactly in this; in short, that we must learn to live and not live to learn. It is good to know what Plato thought, but the thoughts of Plato can no longer be ours; "the ancients are the ancients, and we are the people of to-day," or even, to put it forcibly, "it is in us that is to be found that antiquity which we revere in others"; and we must endeavour to think in our turn like them, that is to say freely and naturally, but not according to them. Let us know Latin if we will, and Greek if we can, but let us first be sensible men; and to this end let us bring learning out of its cave, and remove its sordid, pedantic, and repulsive appearance, and bring it into the world amongst courtiers and ladies, and make it intelligible, accessible, and hence profitable to those whose profession it neither is nor ever will be. And, when we write, let us remember that it is not for those few persons who know as well as and sometimes better than we do the subject we are treating, but, on the contrary, for those who know it not so well, who have the right to know it not so well, but who wish to know it all the same.

The import of this lesson, which was given without any pedantry, and urged and insinuated rather than given, will be better understood by considering some of its consequences in the history of our

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

literature. By imposing on the writer the qualities of order and clearness—qualities which they themselves do not always show in their writing, though they have a lively appreciation of their value—women assured the perfection of French prose and its universal domination. One of the outstanding merits of the *Discours de la Méthode*, and that which still gives it life, is to have brought philosophy out of the darkness of the schools and the closets of the abstractors of quint-essences, to make it appear, as it were, in the broad daylight of the public thoroughfare, and to introduce it accordingly into the conversation of polite society. Pascal did the same in writing his *Lettres provinciales*: he laicised, if I may say so, the theological controversy; he gave to the gentlemen of the court, and not only to the gentlemen, but to the ladies too, the means of disputing on “efficacious grace” and “proximate power.” And Bossuet, too, did the same, and later on the Voltaires, the Montesquieus, the Rousseaus, the Buffons; the last in making history for the first time readable, for up to then it had been buried in the heavy folios of a Dupleix or a Mézeray; the first in translating, for the use of Madame de Tencin or Madame du Deffand, the learned lucubrations of a Grotius or a Puffendorff; and all of them, in fact, one after the other, in opening up new roads, by making *literary* what was not so before, and what is not so necessarily—a metaphysical dissertation, a theological discussion, the history of a great heresy or of a diplomatic negotia-

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

tion, and even a chapter of physical astronomy or comparative physiology. Of all the services that women have been able to render French literature, surely no one will think that this is the least. For it is undoubtedly they, by their demands still more than by their example, though there has been no lack of examples, who have given French prose the qualities which are the last to be denied it—elegance in precision, perfection in measure, and, in the very great writers, lucidity in depth.

What though women have passed all measure in their demands: they would not be women had it been otherwise. In endeavouring to purify a language, we always run the risk of impoverishing it, and, in regulating its style, it is no uncommon thing to blunt that vivacity of expression which is its soul, so to speak. In the same way, if we are willing to admit that art should not represent everything, nor the writer speak of everything, it is very difficult, and indeed very rash, to try to mark exactly where the privilege of both ends and their freedom begins. The *Précieuses* who were in society, and generally in the best of society, and, after the *Précieuses*, the women who succeeded them for more than a century and a half in the direction of literary taste, were too ready to believe that the liberty of art and of the writer was bounded by their caprice, and that the world was neither wider nor more varied than what could be contained, in women and men, in their *ruelles*

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

and *salons*. Hence followed several consequences, of which they must bear the blame, and which I shall now endeavour to point out cursorily.

I cannot consider so very criminal their ways of talking, which are often odd, but sometimes happy, and always amusing. There has been much stupid talk on this matter. They perhaps impoverished the language of some pithy words and simple turns, but, when everything is taken into account, they enriched it with almost as many new words or expressions. And it is not they who invented these metaphors of which Molière makes fun: "I am going to fish in the lake of my memory with the fish-hook of my thought"; or again: "In the public square of your attention I shall lead in dance the bear of my eloquence"; these, in particular, belong to the greater time of the Italian Renaissance. Who does not know, too, that there are at least as many conceits in a drama of Shakespeare as antitheses in a letter of our Balzac? And, like the *seicentismo* of the Italians and the *euphuism* of the English, did not the *cultism* of Antonio Perez and Gongora precede in European literature that of the Marquis de Mascarille and the Vicomte de Jodelet? Euphuism, or cultism, or whatever name it is called, is a malady of language, which can sometimes extend to the thought, but does not always do so; which, moreover, to be well discussed, would perhaps need to be studied more seriously than has been done so far, and more

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

scientifically too; for its effects often resemble closely enough those of the natural expansion of the creative power of languages. That it is ridiculous to ask me, to make me sit down, "to satisfy the desire which an arm-chair has to embrace me," I shall certainly not deny; but, since an arm-chair is usually said to have arms, I ask, when is the precise moment in its evolution that a metaphor ceases to be clever and becomes ridiculous? There has not been enough interest taken in the solution, or even the examination, of this question.

What the *Précieuses* must be accused of is, of having aggravated, by establishing the language of good society, and in order to establish it, the difference that everywhere separates the language of literature from the language of the people. We, in France, have no literature of the people; the finest efforts of our eloquence, the most of our finest verses somehow expire before they reach the million; and every writer worthy of his name is really with us an aristocrat. How often has this been pointed out? All Spain understands *Don Quixote*, and in Italy they sing the octaves of the *Jerusalem*; Burns, to the Scots, is a people's poet, and Dickens, to the English, is a novelist of the masses; we, in France, have our novels of Paul de Kock and our songs of the "cafés-concerts," *La Laitière de Montfermeil* and the *Bi du bout du banc*. The *Précieuses* are partly responsible for this. It

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

is not that they aimed at or wished this, it is not even, in a certain sense, that they did anything for it. But they ignored the existence of too many things round about them; they had not a sufficient knowledge of the world or of life, but only of the salons and of the court, and of a few men of letters; their experience was lacking in breadth and variety. Envious of the suffrage of the salons, the men of letters in their turn, wishing to have, as is said, the women on their side, insensibly limited the field of their observation, diminished their means of expression, and naturally refined on the small number that was left them. Thus, in no literature, perhaps, is the written style more different from the spoken style than in ours; in none is it more difficult to reach the crowd and to satisfy at the same time the select few; and in none, in short, have the best writers themselves—I mean prose writers—fewer appreciative readers at home, but, by compensation, more admirers abroad.

According as authors, under the influence of the salons and the ladies, thus gave up the ordinary use of language and the observation of life, they gave up also the natural and the true. This is a new grievance, and perhaps the most grave, though luckily the native independence of some great men could not fail to considerably weaken its consequences. The majority of women will always prefer an elegant falsehood to an unpleasant or even indifferent truth; and there

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

would be no *salons* if we were all of us quite natural. To tell the truth, we disguise ourselves to go into the world, and the disguise consists in first throwing off all the preoccupations, the cares, and the habits which are in some way or other the substance of our life, to put on a character whose first merit is not to differ perceptibly from others. This is well if literature is only an amusement ; the material is still rich enough for the observer, since it could suffice for La Rochefoucauld or Madame de Sévigné. But it is otherwise if the writer is entitled to aim at something more, as, for example, to see the true face under the mask, and the real man, living, acting, and feeling under the correction and the order of the man of society ; he needs a liberty which the manners of the court and the salon will never give him. This is the crisis through which the literary influence of women passed in the seventeenth century, and over which it just succeeded in triumphing.

Indeed all the writers of the second class yielded to them, and even one or two of the first. If we except some of the débris of the sixteenth century, belated into the seventeenth, the jesters and the writers of grotesque — born enemies of salons, from many motives, and especially because there there is no drinking—all the others are with them : Balzac and Voiture, Ménage and Chapelain, Conrart and Vaugelas, Benserade and Quinault, Pellisson and Patru, Mascaron and Fléchier, Corneille even and



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

La Fontaine. The envious rail at them, but the women applaud themselves, and they are right, and public favour encourages them. I have endeavoured to point out the motives, and I have done justice to the usefulness of their work. They had spirit and courage, good sense and taste, the taste of the exquisite and of the grand, or rather the grandiose, the art of understanding everything and speaking about everything,—except just what the Pascals and Bossuets, the Molières and Racines, the Boileaus and La Bruyères were to need to speak to them about and to make them understand. Great lords and charming ladies, salons of the Place Royale or the Faubourg Saint Germain, there was no decorum that could hinder the author of the *Pensées* or of the *Sermon sur la Mort* from displaying before their eyes the littleness and the nothingness of man, the unbounded vanity of his enjoyments, and that inexorable weariness which is the substance of human existence. There was none that could restrain the author of *Tartufe* or of *Phèdre* from piercing to the bottom of worldly hypocrisy, or of leaving behind vain gallantries to paint in all their reality the passions of love. And there were no considerations that could lead the author of the *Satires* to moderate his anger at the verses of Chapelain, or the author of the *Caractères* to spare us the bitterness of his experience of the world and of life.

This is why we see them all, each in his own

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

way, without plot or plan, rising against the domination of the rhetoricians and the *Précieuses*. La Bruyère attacks them with his biting and subtle irony, which inflicts but a deeper wound; Boileau was careful not to forget them in his *Satire sur les Femmes*:—

'Tis theirs to pet at whom the wits poke fun,  
And grant an audience if the world gives none.

Racine riddles them with his epigrams; Molière writes the *Précieuses ridicules* and the *Femmes savantes*; Bossuet pitilessly upbraids those worldlings who wish to know how the preacher spoke, “who compare him with himself and with others, and the first discourse with the following, . . . as if the pulpit were a place of contest for the prize of eloquence”; and it was on his scorn, in short, of all rhetoric and all eloquence that Pascal dared to found his own.

This is why we will also find—if we examine the *Memoirs* and the *Correspondence* of the time—that not one of them frequented the fashionable salons. And how could they, if it is there they have their adversaries and their enemies, if it is in the salons that Molière is reproached with the crudity of his pictures, and Racine with the truth of his? Even the worthy marquise, Madame de Sévigné herself, is she not suspected of preferring Nicole to Pascal? She undoubtedly admires the eloquence of Bossuet, but

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

how much more that of Mascaron or of Fléchier ! And despite the court, despite Louis XIV and his declared protection, the battle continues until, Pascal and Molière being dead, Bossuet having ceased to preach and Racine to write, and Boileau having retired into a morose and sullen solitude, the women and the salons regain their empire. It is for them, and thanks to them, that the Pradons and Boyers are reborn, the Perrins and the Corases ; for them that the Pavillons and the Sainte-Aulaires turn their madrigals, which for that matter are as lively as they are elegant ; for them that Fontenelle writes his *Pluralité des Mondes* ; for them that Massillon preaches. The Marquise de Lambert revives the traditions of the Hôtel de Rambouillet. The Duchesse du Maine exaggerates them, with her characteristic taste for the excessive ; others follow, a new age begins, and the movement, checked for a short time, resumes its course now stronger than ever.

For never was the power of women greater than in the eighteenth century, and on to the approach of the Revolution. It is then that they are veritable queens, mistresses and judges of taste and opinion. Their courtiers, or rather their subjects, are now called Chaulieu, Lamotte, Sacy, Mairan, Moncrif, Marivaux, Trublet, even Montesquieu ; and, as at the height of the influence of the *Précieuses*, they filled the French Academy. Why is it that history and criticism here change their tone ? What has

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

not been said of the salons of the eighteenth century ! In what method have they not been celebrated ! What place have they not been given in the history of French literature !

But, from one end of the century to the other, has it been noted what writers frequented the salons, and how the truly great men, or rather the only great men, were seldom there ? Voltaire may be said to have lingered in them, though for that matter I have never found him at Madame de Lambert's or Madame de Tencin's ; but after once having breathed their atmosphere with delight, circumstances turned him from them, and it is from that time, and the point is well worth the trouble of being noted, that dates his true influence on his contemporaries. Montesquieu also is to be met at Madame du Deffand's, and caught sight of at Madame Geoffrin's, but he is only on a passing visit, so to speak, when he chances to come to Paris, and for eight or ten months of the year it is at La Brède, while making his wine, that he thinks out his *Esprit des Lois*. It is the same, too, with Buffon ; when he leaves Montbard, if he thinks of calling on Mademoiselle de Lespinasse, he is said to astound this eternally enamoured creature with the familiarity of his manners and the vulgarity of his conversation. I say nothing of Rousseau : the part he sets himself to play is to fly from salons and society, where, moreover, he feels ill at ease, as if he feared that their flatteries, by softening the violence

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

or his hatreds, would deprive his eloquence of the food which was its nourishment.

And, in truth, not one of them had need of the salons, nor the salons of them. Let the salons applaud the pastorals of Fontenelle and the tales of Moncrif! The value of the *Esprit des Loix* or of the *Discours sur l'Inégalité* does not depend on the approbation of Madame du Deffand or the opinion of Madame d'Épinay. They are badly prepared, and above all in a bad position, to judge and even to understand these works. The meaning is beyond them, as also is that of the *Histoire naturelle*, and even of *Candide* and the *Homme aux quarante Écus*. But they made up for it by gathering around them, and so completing the picture, if not Voltaire or Buffon, at least Saint-Lambert and Marmontel, Duclos and Voisenon, Bernis and Boufflers, Laharpe and Thomas, Grimm, Galiani, Chamfort and Rivarol, Delille and Morellet. These are the men who are wanted, men whose merit I do not deny, who are far from being worthless, who can speak, can write, can turn a madrigal or give point to an epigram, draw up a speech or rhyme a tragedy, but men, in short, whose work has perished almost entirely with themselves, and who could be cut out of the history of the century and almost not be missed.

I am wrong and must correct myself: they succeeded at least in reducing the material of observation, and, by force of perfecting the language, they

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

succeeded in weakening it. I have said that they could write : this is not sufficient. Never was writing more clear, for never was style more abstract : it is the limpidity of pure water, and it is also, and above all, the insipidity. Why are the little verses of the Chevalier de Boufflers not by the Abbé de Bernis, just as a tragedy of Marmontel might be by La Harpe, or a saying of Rivarol by Chamfort ? Differences in spirit vanish one after the other in the lack of distinction in the style ; a man must speak like everybody to be sure to be understood by everybody ; and good taste ceases at the precise point where originality begins. At this period of the century the coincidence had become perfect : the proprieties of society are the very laws of the art of writing. Words are now but signs of a conventional algebra, and the laws of hard logic regulate their uniform arrangement. But it is not Buffon or Voltaire who is to be blamed for this, as they have often been, and still less is it Rousseau ; it is the salons ; and it is the writers who aimed, like those I have just mentioned, only at the approbation of the salons,—if indeed they did not write solely to be admitted into them.

It is told that, at Madame Geoffrin's, every time the conversation threatened to break loose "on authority, religion, politics, morality, people in office or men in power," the hostess hastened to check the offenders with an "Oh, isn't this good !" and to send them, as she said herself, to make their noisy gossip elsewhere.

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

This is the last reproach which can be brought against the salons. At no time, perhaps, and certainly not under the old regime, was it possible to discuss the great questions, and still less to plunge deep into them, for there was really nothing in the world, according to the circumstances, more pedantic or fantastic. Everything might be touched upon, but nothing was to be examined deeply ; everything might be spoken about, but without being considered in its essentials. Besides that it is polite to share the opinion of everybody else, we do not meet together to weary, but on the contrary to amuse ourselves. If, then, we have any crotchets, no matter their nature, or should they be metaphysical, nothing would be more out of place than to make them public and thereby disturb those who take no interest in them. This is the rule of the game, and the rule is good. It is only regrettable when the habits of conversation in society are carried into the art of writing, and this is what happened in the history of our literature. All the questions that can naturally interest worthy people we have treated, under the influence of the salons, as they would be treated there, and only as they could possibly be treated there, that is to say, pleasantly and superficially. "To speak always nobly of mean things, and simply enough of lofty things" has thus become the law of our writers, as it was of conversation. Out of deference to women, or, perhaps, without thinking of it, and by the mere contagion of example, some very great writers, such as

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

Montesquieu, aimed at dealing in a grave manner with the most futile objects, and made a mannerism of so doing ; and others, such as Voltaire, at deciding by an epigram, often enough of very doubtful taste, the most grave questions. Thus it follows that the salons are in this way responsible, to say nothing about other matters, for all the artificiality and superficiality of the *Esprit des Lois* and of the *Essai sur les Mœurs*.

There are, too, certain questions of the most serious and lofty nature, which the salons excluded from the range of our authors and our literature, just as they had always excluded them from conversation. "*Although conversation ought always to be equally natural and reasonable,*" wrote, in 1680, Mademoiselle de Scudéry, "*I admit for all that that there are occasions when even the sciences can enter into it with a good grace*"; and this could not have been said better, nor could it at the same time be more entirely just. The salons were not made for discussions, for example, on Semitic inscriptions or comparative anatomy. Not only the pure sciences, but what are called the applied sciences, and politics, and social economy could not "enter with a good grace" into polite conversation, and still less, undoubtedly, history, philosophy, and religion. Consequently they have not entered into it, nor into our literature. It is an astonishing thing for foreigners, especially for Germans and Englishmen, perhaps also for Russians, and generally for men of the North, to note the indifference of our writers to the problems



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

which torment the soul of Faust or Hamlet. And, indeed, these questions are hardly ever treated in the salons, in spite of the strange way in which they often trouble women. Their attention is directed to quite other objects. The present life, and only its outmost part, the social life and its relations, occupies and absorbs them entirely ; and our writers, to be on good terms with them, confine and absorb themselves in it, and are absorbed in it with them. One is sorry for the French genius to see the air of unconcern, and the tone of elegant badinage with which even a Voltaire, in his pamphlets, his *Contes*, and his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, ridicules or scouts, despite all his genius, whatever he does not understand. If we had not had our Protestants ; if we had not had our Jansenists, those of the early times, and Pascal above all ; if we had not had our great preachers, Bossuet, Bourdaloue, and even Massillon ; if we had not had Rousseau, the *Profession de foi du Vicaire savoyard* and the *Lettres de la Montagne*, it would be terrible to think of the number of questions to which our classic literature remains almost entirely a stranger. What does Racine think of free-will, and Molière of destiny ? The salons have lightened, as it were, our literature of its philosophic ballast. And if, towards the end of the eighteenth century, in the foreboding of a universal catastrophe, and in that slightly feverish state of agitation which precedes great crises, some of them broach for the first time the discussion of the public

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

interest, and the political and social questions of the immediate future, these other questions of which we are speaking, and which are vital in another way, since the conduct and direction of life depend on them, are still refused admittance. They have not yet forced the door.

Let us hasten to admit—not to expose ourselves to the reproach of pedantry, to exaggerate nothing, to place the good side by side with the bad—that the salons were able to compensate in some measure for what they deprived us of, and that the losses which we enumerate have been balanced by real gains. True, we have neither Milton nor Shakespeare, neither a *Paradise Lost* nor a *Hamlet*; we have neither Goethe nor Kant; but in no literature, since Letters have been written, are there any that can be compared with the Correspondence of Voltaire or Madame de Sévigné, or even with that of Madame du Deffand or Mademoiselle de Lespinasse; and this is already something. Likewise, in what other literature can be found that succession of penetrating moralists who, from Montaigne to Rivarol, one after the other, with as much steadiness as delicacy of hand, have anatomised the social and moral man even to his imperceptible fibres? And with whatever brilliance the English novel may have shone, in the present century still more than in the last, I am not sure if, on making the necessary exceptions, I do not still prefer the vein of the

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

French novel. I could say much more, if I chose, about the theatre, which for the last two hundred years or more has become our privilege and monopoly. And it must be admitted that it is to the influence of women, to the life of the salons and the court, to the perfection of the spirit of sociability, that this is really due.

“It is only women who can express in a single word a whole emotion and render delicately a delicate thought”; and when La Bruyère, before even the letters of Madame de Sévigné were known, thus praised the superiority of women in letter-writing, he found the explanation of it in their very effort towards preciosity. And in truth this anxiety to speak well—so far as it consists in enhancing, by the expression or the sentiment, by the vivacity of a turn or the unexpectedness of a touch, things that are ordinary or common, in giving to good sense even and to banality the charm and piquancy of paradox, in passing over in silence precisely that which is wished to be heard, or in diminishing, without appearing to do so, the importance or gravity of what is said—is not this anxiety to speak well preciosity itself, understood as it should be, and is it not the basis of epistolary style? Have you ever asked yourself why it is that the letters of so many great writers—the few we have of this same La Bruyère, those of Boileau, those of Racine, or also, in the eighteenth century, those

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

of Montesquieu, of Rousseau often, and Buffon always — give such a bad and far-away likeness of their authors, correspond so little to their works, and rather contradict the idea we had formed of them? It is because they do not write them for the pleasure of writing them, but from particular reasons, to fulfil their obligations, from duty rather than from inclination. Women, on the contrary, put their whole soul into them, their invincible desire of pleasing, all the abundance and vivacity of their conversation. They are not content with mentioning things, they mention them again, and in twenty ways, each way adding something unexpected to the elegance of the others. Their simple manner does not come naturally; it is acquired. They owe it to their experience in society, or, rather, it is their nature not to be natural, and to do with ease, good humour, and simplicity what men do only with difficulty, bungling, and clumsiness. As society is their element and the salons their universe, they are only truly and absolutely women in entering into society and reigning in the salons. In their letters, therefore, are to be found that art of “perverting facts” which is the basis of modern conversation, these unusual metaphors and periphrases which serve to disguise what they cannot say crudely, that “spirit of politeness” which warns them on every occasion to stop in time, that playfulness which inspires “a disposition to make use of everything and

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

be wearied with nothing." In emancipating women, the spirit of society permitted them to be themselves, but undoubtedly they are themselves only in so far as they differ from men, and it is in letter-writing, which is most in their line, that they have shown these differences and shown their originality. Some men of wit, ready and quick like them, have now and then succeeded in robbing them of something—Voltaire, for example, and—if only he had not had such a strong hankering after the gross, to say nothing more—the author of the *Lettres à Mademoiselle Voland*.

No more need we doubt that the penetration of our moralists has been sharpened by contact with women in the subtle atmosphere of the salons. Under the uniformity of appearance and outward correctness of bearing, it soon became a malicious occupation to endeavour to discover and recognise shades of difference. La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère in the seventeenth century particularly excelled in this; Rivarol and Chamfort a little later, towards the end of the eighteenth. How often "gravity is a mysterious carriage of the body invented to cover the defects of the mind" we might not know but for La Rochefoucauld; and he himself recognised this only by being struck, in the salon of Madame de Sablé or of Madame de La Fayette, with the stupidity of a magistrate or the majestic nullity of a bishop. That a man without position

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

“cannot be benevolent, but only good-natured,” as Chamfort remarked, is another of these fine distinctions which can be hardly recognised in everyday experience: they are too imperceptible; opportunity and leisure are necessary to observe them. Thanks to the life of the salons and of the court, our moralists, if they have too often lost sight of the individual man, have at least understood and described the essential character of the universal man, or better still of the social man. They have advanced the dissection of him, as I said, to the last degree of delicacy and precision. And, perfecting the language at the same time as their powers of observation, their means of expression, if I may say so, at the same time as their eyes, while inimitable in the art of discovering shades of distinction, they are equally so in the almost infinite resources they have found in the use of the poorest vocabulary and the severest syntax.

This is not yet all, and I consider it would be an inexcusable omission not to credit the influence of the salons and women with one part at least in the rise of the modern drama and novel. In purifying love, in spiritualising it, in mingling sentiment with it—yet without letting the devil lose his share, as the saying goes—in making it a topic of conversation, women have made it, in France, the great question of the nation. If we omit those whose profession forbids them to speak of the passions of

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

love otherwise than to deplore them and condemn their errors, our modern literature is taken up entirely with this topic, as was the talk in the salon of Madame de Lambert or of Madame de Rambouillet. And for the last two hundred and fifty years, that is to say since the birth or the formation of polite society, I do not think that there is any literature, not even the Italian, which is richer in tales of gallantry and emotion, and generally of love. D'Urfé was the first; Racine followed him—too clever, though shrinking from the salons and fleeing the *Précieuses*, not to avail himself of whatever he found in them to suit the nature of his genius; then came Marivaux, then Prévost, then Rousseau, all adding to it the flame of passion; and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, and the author of *Atala*; and the author of *Delphine*; and the author of *Indiana*, of *Valentine*, of *Jacques*, of *Mauprat*, and Balzac; and after them so many others! Need we add the poets, Lamartine at least, and Musset, if not Hugo? If the salons really did not do everything, it is they, at the first at any rate,—by directing manners towards gallantry, to say the least, as much as towards politeness—who drew the mass of writers after them. It is they who, in a literature which had been rational so far, or at least intellectual, made sentiment play the part it had been so long denied. It is they who began by distinguishing, noting, and classifying for us the changing shades of the same sentiment or the same

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

passion ; they who planned, and then enriched, that *Carte de Tendre* which is a laughing-stock, but which, after all, novelists are only eternally running over in the search of new countries and an unexplored corner. And it is they, though they have impoverished the language of description, who have supplied the language of observation and psychological analysis ; and perhaps also that of the dialogue for our dramatic authors. And since I can here only indicate what would require too much space to show clearly, it is this, in short, that can be verified by a mere glance at the history of foreign literatures, in which the drama and the novel have been at all times, as with us, exactly what the spirit of sociability has made them.

These are undoubtedly many services—so many services that I really hesitate while on the point of concluding, and ask myself if the best conclusion would not be to give up the search for one. For, do you not care for the salons and do you happen to hold the same ideas on women as the Arnolphe of the *École des Femmes* or the Chrysale of the *Femmes savantes*, that is to say, the same as Molière ? Then I have spoken of the evil which the salons have done us, and some of even our greatest writers. But, on the contrary, do you care for the salons and hold the same ideas on them as Madame de Lambert or Madame de Rambouillet ? This can be done without literary scruple, and I have endeavoured



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

to show the reasons why. What everybody must at least admit is that this is a sign by which great and durable influences are to be recognised,—the difficulty of deciding definitely for or against them. I may add that this has been more than once overlooked, by the one party in their too violent attacks on the *Précieuses*, by the other in their immoderate praise of the eighteenth century salons, and by the one as by the other precisely from not having appreciated this influence at its true value; and this is certainly one conclusion.

But if now we seek to characterise in one word the nature of this influence, we may say that women have given the French genius its *form*. While in other literatures, generally, the great writers create in a way at once the *matter* and the *form* of their work, and are masters, at the very least, of one as well as the other, it is to be remarked that in our literature they must, to be received, accommodate their *matter* to a *form* which is given or agreed upon beforehand. In French there are rules of the art of writing as of that of composing,—or rather they are the same,—which we call *formal*, that is to say pre-existent to the ideas which are to be expressed. So the women have decided. What they wished was that the writer should not be allowed to remake the language in his own image, and, were he to try to, that he should incur their disgrace and be considered a barbarian. They wished like-

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

wise that if a person wrote, it should be with the intention of being read and consequently understood, and that he should not be contented with being understood by himself, and still less by himself alone. They wished, also, that there should be no sentiment, no matter how subtle, and no thought, no matter how profound, that could not be expressed by the words and grammar of modern usage. They wished, in short, that elegance should be given to those matters which least allow of it, and that there should never be any escape, under any pretext whatever, from the laws of the art of pleasing. This is why all revolutions in taste have begun, in France, by being revolutions in language : an attempt to introduce into literary usage habits of language which everyday usage had expelled from it, or, inversely, to cleanse the good usage of the mud which the revolutionaries had been able to deposit. But, throughout these revolutions, most of which succeeded only in so far as they had their support, the women always pursued the design they had formed—to subject sooner or later the innovators themselves to the need of clearness, justness, and order. Whatever subject one treats in French, if he wishes to treat it as an author, he must circumscribe and limit it, *transpose* it from its special and technical language into the language of everybody, spare the reader the fatigue of attention, and lead him, in short, to believe that our

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

thoughts have for long been his, and were his even before they were ours. This is the secret, for the last two hundred years, of the diffusion of the French language : French books explain each other. But perhaps this is also the secret of the often strange mistakes which the Germans or English make about our writers. We alone, indeed, under this uniformity of manner, and after much study, are capable of distinguishing in our books the mediocre from the excellent, the commonplace from the original, and a clever rhetorician from a very great writer. I have so many appropriate names at the end of my pen, and so many titles, that I prefer not to give any.

As to the utility of this discipline, I consider it good, if we write solely to please ; less good, as I have said, if we aim at something higher, but yet still good. "We warn those who read these writings," said Bossuet once, in a preface, "that they must expect to find in many places very subtle matters *which may give them trouble to read*, but which I cannot convey to the minds of men without their attention, nor without that attention being troublesome." And it is certain that there are some matters which can receive only a certain degree of clearness, which cannot be treated cursorily, which are not to be skimmed, which must be fathomed ; but perhaps also we need to be Bossuet to dare to touch them. Most of our great writers have shaken off the yoke of this discipline,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

and it is clear that they have been right, but it will always be furiously delicate, as our *Précieuses* used to say, to try to imitate them in this point. Voltaire even, who dared so much, had not this audacity, or at least he had it only on the example of Rousseau. The fact is that to revolt against conventions we must be sure of having genius, or at least of having very new truths to proclaim, of speaking in a very great cause, of acting in the name of very great interests. And since it is evident that the one is as rare as the other, the best course is to follow traditions when they have been fixed, as is here the case, by the most worthy people who have preceded us, when these are, moreover, conformable to the genius of the race, and have, in short, assured in the world the empire of the national spirit.

For all these reasons let us hope, in conclusion, with M. Jacquinet—in his interesting Introduction to his *Reueil de morceaux choisis*—that his collection, and the pleasure which everybody will undoubtedly take in perusing it, will inspire someone with the ambition of writing this *History of Polite Society*—of which a woman, who unfortunately lacked the ability, would seem to have had the first idea; of which Rœderer, in a curious book, and Victor Cousin, in a well known one, have sketched only the first chapters; and from which we may draw quite different conclusions, and many more too, than they have. Let us only advise this future historian not to believe for a

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

moment this melancholy Thomas and this terrible Diderot, nor, when discussing women, to think of "dipping his pen in the rainbow" or of shaking over his writing "the dust of the wings of butterflies." Despite appearances, false brilliance would be nowhere more unsuitable. There is need of taste rather than of show; of acuteness, but not of eloquence; of as much discretion in praise as moderation in criticism; of a simple and quite uniform style. And let us beg of him to hasten with this book, if he has no special reason for delay, for at the rate at which things are going, we may soon lose entirely the sense and appreciation of those manners which have quite passed away.

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF MOLIÈRE

I KNOW it is difficult to make oneself understood, and I willingly admit that whoever does not succeed in doing so has himself to blame. But really, with every allowance for my own incompetence, I would never have believed it would have been so hard to convince certain Frenchmen—dramatic authors, professors, journalists, and lecturers—that Molière would not be Molière had he not thought sometimes; that there is something more in him than a classic Labiche; and that after seeing the *École des Femmes* or the *Malade imaginaire*, and laughing heartily at Arnolphe or the worthy Argan, we still carry away with us something to think over for a long time. For having dared to say so, indeed, I find that I am reminded on all hands of the false modesty which is expected of the commentator, and I would have required to treat Molière as a merry-andrew or buffoon, in order not to cause alarm among those who will on no account allow their notion of him to be disturbed; or rather, according to their view, it is in this way that he will now have to be treated.

“Come away, Baptiste, make us laugh,” said Molière

## ESSAYS IN FRENCH LITERATURE

to Lulli, when he felt the need of laughing at other fooling than his own—which, moreover, is not always clever,—and the story goes that the Florentine did his best. So too it seems that we do not nowadays ask more of him whom his century called “the contemplator” than amusement. Jester he was, and jester let him remain! His whole business is to amuse us, and if we haven’t paid for it, our fathers have! Only we forget that he would be dead, like so many others who none the less did not fail to amuse the good folk of their time, had there been nothing more in his work than in theirs; and that, since we must possess for the understanding of the *École des Femmes* or *Tartufe* what is ironically called “enlightenment” and “intellect,” which are quite unnecessary for the appreciation of *La Cagnotte*, this is just the reason why he is Molière.

I shall lay stress at the outset on this remark. Nobody now is unaware that the subject of the *École des Femmes*, which was borrowed by Molière from Scarron, is essentially the same as that of the *Folies amoureuses* and the *Barbier de Séville*. There is the same situation, the same intrigue, the same dénouement. There are the same characters too; Bartholo, Albert, or Arnolphe, it is still the same guardian who is duped; Rosine, Agathe, or Agnès, it is still the same artless girl who makes game of him; Almaviva, Éraste, or Horace, it is still the same lover who lends his aid, young, resourceful, and triumphant. Yet, in whatever

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

esteem we hold Beaumarchais or Regnard, they are not Molière, neither in build nor in class, nor perhaps in species, and though it is possible to prefer them to him, we never venture a comparison. Why is this? For the fact of being the first of the three could not be considered so great a merit in the author of the *École des Femmes*. And even if this were a merit, it could not belong to him but to Scarron, as we have just said, and not even to Scarron, but to Donna Maria de Zayas y Sotomayor, the Spanish novelist from whom Scarron himself imitated his *Précaution inutile*. In another respect, good judges, delicate and subtle judges, have been able to hold, and not without reason, that the verses of Molière have not in general the elegance and ease, the grace and facility of those of Regnard: that his style, though more *podded* perhaps, to use Sainte-Beuve's happy expression, is yet not so lively, smart, or clever, nor its air so free and sprightly. And who will refuse to admit that, if the plot of the *Barbier de Séville* is not better than that of the *École des Femmes*, it is at least in a way more *implex*, as used to be said, more ingenious, richer in surprises, above all nearer our modern taste? From Molière to Beaumarchais, during the insensible decadence of all the other parts of the dramatic art, one alone has been perfected, and this is precisely the intrigue; and the comedy of Beaumarchais marks the principal epoch in this progress.

Since, then, it is neither by the complexity nor the



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

ingeniousness of the intrigue, nor by quality of style, nor novelty of invention, that Molière is as superior to his first model as to his imitators, what is there left, and what conclusion is to be drawn? There is left this, that it is by the depth of the penetration with which he has drawn his characters; by the truth of an imitation of life which could not succeed but from a certain manner, at once personal and original, of seeing, understanding, and judging life itself; in one word, by the reach, or, in another, by the philosophy of his work.

It is this philosophy which, in the following pages, I shall try to define and characterise. Not that I wish, as may be suspected, to ascribe to the author of the *Fourberies de Scapin* what is called a connected system. I shall not forget that I am speaking of a dramatic author, and that *Tartufe*, the *École des Femmes*, and the *Malade imaginaire* are primarily comedies. But what I shall not forget also is that Molière thinks; and since he makes me think, I wish to know on what? Since he forces me to reflect on certain questions, I wish to know what precisely these questions are. Since he has put them, I wish to know how he has decided them. And if these questions do still concern us, and are still of living interest, I wish to know, in short, how far I am myself for or against Molière. His comedies are not exactly *theses*, but they are not very far from being so. They have more connection with the

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

*Fils naturel* than with *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, or with the *Ami des Femmes* than with *Mademoiselle de Belle-Isle*. Nothing could be more unlike anecdotes stretched over five acts. In this sense, the philosophy of Molière may be said to be Molière himself, and I shall endeavour to show that, properly understood, it is Molière in his entirety.

---

### I

#### THE PHILOSOPHY OF NATURE

IT does not appear that he took any trouble to disguise his philosophy, nor consequently is it difficult to recognise or to name. *Naturalistic* or *realistic*, what the comedy of Molière always preaches, by its faults as much as by its merits, is the imitation of nature; and its great lesson in æsthetics and in morality, is that we must submit, and, if we can, conform to nature. By this, by the endeavour after a faithful imitation of nature, is to be explained the subordination, in his plays, of the situations to the characters; the simplicity of the intrigues, the most of which are only "scenes of private life"; the unsatisfactoriness of the dénouements, which, from the very fact that they are not dénouements, bear a closer resemblance to life, where nothing begins or ends.

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

By this also is to be explained the quality and the depth of the comic art of Molière. For if, among the many ways of provoking laughter, Molière knew too well his triple business of author, actor, and manager to despise or overlook any of them, not excepting the easiest and commonest, there is yet one which he prefers, and this way consists in making merry over habits or prejudices which are conquered by the all-powerfulness of nature. And by this still, by his confidence in nature, is to be explained also, and above all, the character of his satire, since he directed it only against those whose fault or absurdity lay in disguising, falsifying, corrupting, restraining, or endeavouring to coerce nature.

In the same way he never inveighed against licentiousness or debauchery; he never inveighed against ambition: he never seems even to have had the intention of attacking them. These are vices which are instinctive and conformable to nature: they are self-confessed, and sometimes even vaunted. What more natural in a man than to wish to raise himself above his fellows, unless it be to play with the pleasures of life? But, on the other hand, "preciéuses" of every sort and absurd marquises, ageing prudes and grey-haired gallants, bourgeois people who would be gentlemen and matrons who dabble in philosophy, sextons or great lords who cover "their fierce resentment under the cloak of heaven's interest," the Don Juans and Tartufes, the Philamintes and Jourdain,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

the Arnolphes and Arsinoés, the Acastes and Madelons, the Diafoiruses and Purgons — these are his victims. They are all those who disguise nature, who, to distinguish themselves from her, begin by leaving her, and who, flattering themselves on being stronger or cleverer than she is, have had the pretensions to govern her and reduce her to their sway.

On the other hand all those who follow nature, true nature, the Martines and Nicoles, his Chrysale and Madame Jourdain, Agnès, Alceste, and Henriette, with what sympathy have they not always been treated? "Such are his people, such is the way to act." They show themselves just as they really are; and by nothing but showing themselves they bring into prominence the universal and somewhat mean complacency of Philinte, the fierce egoism of Arnolphe, the stupidity of M. Jourdain, the pretentious simpering of Armande, or the solemn affectedness of her mother Philaminte. Is the lesson not clear enough? On the side of those who follow nature, on the side of the former, are also truth, good sense, honesty, and virtue; on the other side are absurdity, pretension, stupidity, hypocrisy—that is to say, on the side of those who defy nature, who treat her as an enemy, and whose doctrine is to fight and triumph over her.

But the critics are unwilling to yield, and carp and quibble over the words *nature* and *natural*. Nature is one thing, they say, and the natural is another, and

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

that makes two ; and, if they have not gone the length of saying they are the opposites of each other, I rather fear they think so. Here is a distinction which Molière would have laughed at heartily ! The “old fellow” of the *Lettres provinciales* has few more amusing, and so I shall not name the discoverer thereof. Others hold that this kind of religion or philosophy of nature was able to mislead a Rousseau, but not a Molière, a comic author, the man who has left us “so rich a gallery of vicious and absurd creatures.” They have not considered what is habitually the character of these “absurd” and “vicious” creatures ; and that if their vice or absurdity is to contradict nature, that is exactly what we have just been saying. But those seem to come nearer the point who remark that the word nature, which is vague, changeable, and badly defined, may perhaps have several meanings ; that, if there is one which can be agreed upon to-day, it must differ from that in vogue in the seventeenth century ; and that, before knowing how far it differs, it would be imprudent to inscribe Molière in the number of the philosophers of nature. We must then investigate what was understood at that time by the word *nature*—if it was only a mysterious name covering a great mass of philosophical indifference and love of easy pleasures, or on the contrary, as we hold, containing two or three ideas, very precise, very bold, and much more akin than we might suspect to those which it expresses nowadays.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

If I am forced to go rather far back, I must lay the blame on the historians of our literature. To read them, one would really think that the Molières and Racines fell from the clouds one day, and if, in speaking of them, they do sometimes consider the *milieu*—for the *milieu* is the history of the love of Racine for Mdle. du Parc or the relations of Molière with Madeleine and Armande Béjart—they have, on the other hand, a strange heedlessness and unconcern of the *moment*; chronology for them is non-existent. No doubt, to explain the comedy of Molière, they are capable of going back to that of Scarron, and, if necessary, even to the *Menteur* or to the Italians, but they are usually satisfied with that. The commentators go much further back, to the fabliaux of the Middle Ages or the Latin comedy. But what neither the one nor the other seems to know is the sixteenth century; they reduce it to three or four names, and are apparently ignorant that the seventeenth century is sprung from it entirely. This was quite clear when, at my suggestion that the philosophy of Molière was what we now call a “philosophy of nature,” they triumphantly upbraided me with crediting Molière with ideas younger than him by some hundred years, and accused me of confusing, with utter senselessness, the true physiognomy of the seventeenth century by mixing up with it certain features of the eighteenth.

Now I used to think that the story of Rabelais

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

belonged to the sixteenth century, and the language seemed significant and eloquent enough.

“All the life of the Thelemites was spent not in laws, statutes, or rules, *but according to their own free will and pleasure*. They rose out of their beds when they thought good; they did eat, drink, labour, sleep, when they had a mind to it and were disposed for it. . . . In all their rule and strictest tie of their order there was but this one clause to be observed, DO WHAT THOU WILT; because men that are free, well-born, well-bred, and conversant in honest companies, *have naturally an instinct and spur that prompteth them unto virtuous actions, and withdraws them from vice*, which is called honour. Those same men, when by base subjection and constraint they are brought under and kept down, turn aside from that noble disposition *by which they formerly were inclined to virtue*, to shake off and break that bond of servitude wherein they are so tyrannously enslaved; for it is agreeable with the nature of man to long after things forbidden and to desire what is denied us.” (*Gargantua*, lvii.)\*

I thought I found there, in this bold vindication of the excellence of nature, all the philosophy of the *École des Femmes*. And I also thought that I found that of *Tartufe* in the famous allegory which we all know:—

“Physis—that is to say, Nature—at her first burthen begat Beauty and Harmony. . . . Antiphysis, who

\* Urquhart's translation.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

ever was the counterpart of Nature, immediately, out of a malicious spite against her for her beautiful and honourable productions, in opposition begat Amodunt and Dissonance. . . . Yet—as you know that apes esteem their young the handsomest thing in the world—Antiphysis extolled her offspring, and strove to prove that their shape was handsomer and neater than that of the children of Physis. . . . Since that, she begot the hypocritical tribes of eavesdropping dissemblers, superstitious pope-mongers, and priest-ridden bigots, the frantic Pistolets, the demoniacal Calvins, impostors of Geneva, the scrapers of benefices, apparitors with the devil in them, and other grinders and squeezers of livings, herb-stinking hermits, gulligutted dunces of the cowl, church vermin, false zealots, devourers of the substance of men, and many more other deformed and ill-favoured monsters, made in spite of nature.” (*Pantagruel*, iv. 32.)\*

This is the purest substance of *pantagruelism*; and if perchance the remark were to be made that the allegory is not Rabelais's own, then its signification would only be clearer, for in this case, instead of being a mere freak, it would be nothing less than the figure or symbol of the very philosophy of the Renaissance.

This may be shown in a few words, the justness of which could be verified as well in the history of European philosophy as in that of Italian art or

\* Motteux's translation.



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

French literature. The Renaissance was in every respect only a reaction, or rather an ardent and passionate revolt of the flesh against the spirit, of nature against discipline ; and, generally, what it set itself to do by the means of this return to paganism, was to emancipate nature and the flesh from their old servitude, in the hopes of deifying them. If there is one meaning in the droll epic of Rabelais, one that is neither hidden nor secret but its soul, I make bold to say that it is none other than this. To use the master's own words, this is its "horrid mystery," its "absconse doctrine," its "substantific marrow." Let us conform to nature. Do not ask her works or actions to be other than her own. And above all, never let us doubt that we fulfil all our duty by following her, since we thus fulfil all her aim. For long, and too long, under the pretext of "imitating the creator of the universe," have men, obeying "some derangement or other of good judgment and common sense" walked "with their feet in the air and their head on the ground," and lived a life opposed to nature and truth. Now the time is come for them to understand that if they form part of nature, it is not for the purpose of distinguishing themselves from her, that where there is pleasure there is no sin, and that Physis, the teacher or mother of all beauty and all harmony, is consequently the teacher and mother of all honour and virtue. This is the teaching of Rabelais ; this is the "holy gospel" he came to preach, "although people scoffed" ; and

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

this is why his work, in which filth rudely blends to the pollution of almost everything which he touches, is the completest expression we have—from the very reason that it is the most confused—of the spirit of the Renaissance. We must not forget that the obscene works of Jules Romain issued from the school of Raphael himself.

The Protestants made no mistake about it, neither Luther, nor especially Calvin; and in this respect no greater error could be committed than to endeavour to reconcile, or rather join them, in a kind of sympathetic indifference, with those who were their worst enemies. As if to this very day the hatred of the Renaissance was not plainly written on the bare and melancholy walls of the Protestant church! If Luther had not seen with his eyes the much vaunted splendour of the age of Leo X, which he called the epoch of Roman infamy, and Paganism seated on the pontifical throne, perhaps the Reformation, which had begun with a “quarrel of monks,” would have ended obscurely in the *in pace* of a German or Italian convent. And who does not know, too, that what Calvin endeavoured to found at Geneva was a republic of the just, where civil and political law, the expression of Christian morality, was founded, like that morality, on the dogma of original sin and predestination? But what happened neither the one nor the other had foreseen: I mean to say that, by arming one half of Christianity against the other, they threw

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

suspicion on the use of liberty, morality, and religion for temporal ends, they compromised the cause they had defended in deplorable and bloody quarrels, and, thanks to their disputes with Catholicism, it was not morality that righted itself, but it was indifference, scepticism, and epicureanism that gained.

At the end of the century, indeed, the language of Montaigne is identical with that of Rabelais:—

“I have taken,” he said, “for my regard this ancient precept, very rawly and simply, that “We cannot err in following Nature”: and that the sovereign document is, for a man to conform himself to her. *I have not, as Socrates, by the power and virtue of reason, corrected my natural complexions, nor by art hindered mine inclination.* Look how I came into the world, so I go on; I strive with nothing. . . . Shall I say thus much by the way? That I see *a certain image of bookish or scholistical ‘prudhomie,’ only which is in a manner in use amongst us, held and reputed in greater esteem than it deserveth, and which is but a servant unto precepts, brought under by hope and constrained by fear?* I love it such as laws and religions make not, but over-make and authorise; *that they may be perceived to have wherewith to uphold herself without other aid:* sprung up in us of her own proper roots, by and from the seed of universal reason, imprinted in every man that is not unnatural.” (*Essays*, III. 12.)\*

\* Florio's translation.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

In a short time these will be the words of the Cléantes, Philintes, and Aristes of our Molière. Moreover, we may now note that they will not go so far as Montaigne, and that none of them will dare to say as boldly as the author of the *Essays* :—

“Nature hath like a kind mother observed this, that such actions as she for our necessities hath enjoined unto us, should also be voluptuous unto us. And doth not only by reason but also by appetite invite us unto them : it were injustice to corrupt her rules. When I behold Cæsar and Alexander in the thickest of their wondrous great labours, so absolutely to enjoy human and corporal pleasures, *I say not, that they release thereby their mind, but rather strengthen the same* ; submitting by vigour of courage their violent occupation and laborious thoughts to the customary use of ordinary life.” (*Essays*, III. 13.)\*

It is a hundred and fifty years before this cynical language is spoken again,—not before Helvétius, Diderot, and the Baron d'Holbach.

For the seventeenth century clearly saw the danger ; and indeed all the characteristics of its earliest years cannot be understood or reduced to unity but by this—by the concern which it felt at the spread of these doctrines, by the horror of the consequences which it saw were sure to follow, and by the effort which it made to stop them.

\* Florio's translation.

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

What did the early *Précieuses*—these *Précieuses* whom Molière was to mock so cruelly, and whose very virtues he was to ridicule—an Arthénice and Sapho, a Cathos and Madelon, what did they do, in purifying the language, but try to make it again respect itself and its readers? Against this dissoluteness of manners which is to be seen everywhere, in the *Moyen de Parvenir* or the *Parnasse satyrique*—and of which we must frankly admit that Henry IV himself from his throne set an example as scandalous, though in a very different way, as Louis XIV,—the cultured folk of the Hôtel de Rambouillet endeavoured to raise their opposition. Men like François de Sales and Bérulle come to their aid from every quarter. Against libertines of the type of Théophile or Des Barreaux there is formed a coalition of all those who do not believe that virtue can, as Montaigne said, “uphold herself without other aid,” or, as Rabelais said, that “men that are free . . . are naturally goaded to virtuous actions.” Priests of the Oratory and Nuns of the Visitation, Carmelites, Friars of Saint John, Franciscan Sisters, it was then, between 1610 and 1625, that all these orders are founded or established in France. It was then also that Mother Angélique reforms Port-Royal, that Saint-Cyran and Jansen begin to spread and preach the doctrines of Saint Augustine, that the very ethics of the Jesuits, still too worldly, too accommodating, or too political, are forced to return to the source of Christianity and become, if I may say so, more rigid and extreme.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

The battle is now fought all along the line, and, from this time onwards, the history of ideas in the seventeenth century is no more than the history of the long combat of Jansenism against Cartesian rationalism on the one hand, and against "libertinism" on the other—for this is what the philosophy of nature was then called.

But what is this philosophy of nature? And can it be really called a philosophy? And who are the "libertines"? And when Mersenne, for example, in an oft-cited fragment, gives the number of atheists at not less than fifty thousand for Paris alone, is he not to be suspected of a little imagination, to begin with,—for how did he count them?—and of a good deal of exaggeration? Is a man an "atheist" for gambling or running after women, or for not keeping Lent, or for burning "a piece of the true Cross"? Who knows the secrets of conscience? And, even in the soul of a Théophile or a Des Barreaux, who knows, or ever can know, the latent faith which still mingles with the outer blusterings of impiety?

Nobody, assuredly. But, instead of the secrets of their hearts, we know at least the principles which they openly confess, and here are some of them. "Men of wit," they say, "believe in God only from convenience, and as a maxim of State." They say also that "all things are led and governed by Destiny, which is irrevocable, infallible, necessary, and inevitable for all men, no matter what they do." And they

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

say too that "there is no other divinity or sovereign power in the world than nature, which must be satisfied in everything, without refusing to our body or our minds what they desire of us in the exercise of their power or natural faculties."

No matter what name they be known by, if our "libertines" of the seventeenth century rally round these principles, their doctrines, we may say, were already those of our modern determinists, naturalists, or materialists. They aimed at something more than gaining the liberty of a life of pleasure. And though our ideas on God, Destiny, or Nature are now more precise, and are enriched by all the scientific discoveries of almost three hundred years, they are no more deeply or securely fixed in our minds. The formulæ alone have varied—and that is something—but not the substance or the essentials.

---

## II

### MOLIÈRE'S EARLY WORK

To have escaped from the influence of the ideas of his time and to have adhered neither to one party nor the other, in a century which was much more contentious than ours and had more readily the courage of its opinions, Molière would have to have been born in

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

different circumstances, to have received from his family and surroundings a different education, and to have served a different apprenticeship in the work of real life. But he was a bourgeois of Paris, like Boileau and Voltaire—and a bourgeois in a small way, the son of Jean Poquelin, upholsterer—and if ever Molière heard the names of a Saint-Cyran or an Arnauld mentioned in his father's house, we may doubt if it was with the accent of respect, or even of sympathy.

They asked of mortal men too great perfection.

I mean to say that they preached virtues which the Parisian bourgeois, the friend of easy pleasures, did not relish any more then than now. And, though bourgeois themselves, they were still too much of gentlemen for all these little upholsterers, linen-drappers, feather-dressers, or men of odd jobs : Jansenism in the seventeenth century was always somewhat aristocratic. I may be allowed to refer the reader, on the question of Molière's early education—his secular, as well as his home education—and his indebtedness to Gassendi, to the recent works, so conscientious and learned, of M. Louis Moland, M. Gustave Larroumet, and M. Paul Mesnard.

In truth, whatever tradition may say, it cannot be proved that Molière ever heard Gassendi or knew him well. But it may suffice that on leaving the Collège de Clermont the young Poquelin, we know



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

not why, formed a friendship with the young Chapelle, and that he was thus enabled to visit the house of Lhuillier, the natural father of Chapelle, much more ribald still and dissolute than his drunken son. "I saw somewhere a print of Rabelais," says Tallemant des Réaux, "which was as like Lhuillier as two peas, for he had the mean and scoffing face of Lhuillier." A mere likeness to Rabelais does not necessarily imply anything. Unfortunately some other details which Tallemant adds give—or would give, if only we could transcribe them—a much worse idea of his character. And if we were to dare yet to add what his friend Nicolas Bouchard has said of him, in his *Confessions d'un Bourgeois de Paris*, we would then be able to judge in what school, in his twentieth year, Molière learned the life of the young man. "These confessions of a very wretched man," said Paulin Paris in his excellent edition of the *Historiettes*, "show up in a very unfavourable light the little meetings of Lhuillier, Du Puys, Gassendi, and other famous people. Excepting the passion and the frenzy, so to speak, of proselytism, *these men were not so much behind the philosophical ideas of the following century.*" It is not we who make him say so, and it is almost forty years since those lines were written! If Molière learned any lessons in philosophy in the company of these debauchees and libertines, they must have been singularly like those which the "petit Arouet" was to receive in his turn from old Ninon de Lenclos

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

and the frequenters of the society of the Temple. Is it astonishing that they bore the same fruits? Or, if this is overstating the case, what more natural than that the examples of indifference or unconcern which Molière had seen while still a child in the house of the upholsterer Poquelin may have prepared him to profit from the lessons of "libertinism" which he received in the house of councillor Lhuillier?

The lessons which he gave himself could not, of course, but confirm the former. Our comedians nowadays are the "notaries of art," as has been so well said; and, no matter how little taste they may show, nothing prevents them joining to the exercise of their profession all the bourgeois virtues, and being good sons, good husbands, good fathers, and all the rest. It was otherwise at the time of Molière. The comedian lived on the margin of society, and claimed the benefits of an irregularity whose annoyances and humiliations he felt daily: and if his ways were not altogether those of a rebel, they were at least those of an independent man, who hardly reckoned with the prejudices of "the wife of the bailie or the wife of the assessor."

The life of a bohemian, the adventurous existence of the travelling comedian, for so he was called, meeting with adventures all along his lengthy route, playing kings in a barn, at Pézenas or Fontenay-le-Comte, travelling in a waggon, when not on foot, in the costume of his character, now dressed as a tyrant

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

and now as a nurse, let us remember that it was this life which Molière led for more than twelve years. Let us call to mind the *Roman comique*. Picture the arrival in a town, at Narbonne or Toulouse, on a hot summer afternoon, the youngsters running to see the "showmen" pass, the curious and distrustful glance of the artisan at the door of his shop or of the housewife at her window ; and in the evening, the nights at the inn, the mixed collection of people, the loud mirth of the company at their table feasting on a big day's drawing ; or even on the following day, if they have been pelted with potatoes, as sometimes happened, their flight at early morning, with violent rage in their hearts, showing itself in reciprocal recriminations ; and often, too, the uncertainty as to where they were to sleep and on what to make their supper. Thus passed the youth of Molière ; too fortunate when the disdain of these country folk, whom he amused for half-a-crown, did not go the length of outrage,—and worthy of respect, it must be said, for not having borne them any further grudge, if certain inoffensive witticisms on Limoges in his *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* and the caricatures of the *Comtesse d'Escarbagnas* are, as they seem to be, his almost unique vengeance.

But if he believed in few things, and if, on leaving Paris, he carried away with him few illusions, he would surely not have brought them back with him from his wanderings through the country ! If, in

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

his twentieth year, he had yielded unawares to the simple attractions of pleasure, he had the time, during these twelve years, to see, to compare, and to reflect. And the comedian who returned to Paris, in 1658, never to leave it again, was not then an ordinary "libertine" or a vulgar "epicurean." He had his ideas, he had his philosophy, he had his plans in reserve; and all those whom he, like Rabelais before him, would have readily treated as "eavesdropping dissemblers, church vermin, and false zealots," were not slow to recognise it.

I shall pass rapidly over his first pieces: *L'Étourdi*, *Le Dépit amoureux*, *Les Précieuses ridicules*, *Sganarelle*, *L'École des Maris*. Not that, if we look at them closely, we can fail to see the thought of Molière and the liberty of his banter already giving promise of greater boldness. If the *Dépit amoureux* and the *Étourdi* are only canvases in the Italian manner, on which Molière is content to trick out the arabesques of his fancy—more brilliant, more lively, more witty too perhaps, at that time while youth had not yet left him, than in the ceremony of the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* or the *Malade imaginaire*—the *Précieuses ridicules* and the *École des Maris* are already a spirited and a well-ordered attack on all those who designed, as we have said, to disguise or deck out nature. Their very succession seems to me instructive. Instead of asking M. de Mascarille simply to sit down, perhaps you say to him, with the Misses Gorgibus, "Satisfy the

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

desire which this chair has to embrace you"? Then you are quite ridiculous, as you are not at all natural. You are, however, only ridiculous. But, instead of overstraining nature and making her, if possible, as ridiculous as we are, perhaps we aim at forcing, cramping, and regulating her? Let us be on our guard. We meet the fate of the Sganarelle of the *École des Maris* and his Isabelle, and we are not only ridiculous, but begin to be dull, harsh, and offensive. First proof or first sketch of Arnolphe, this Sganarelle differs from him only in being treated less seriously, in the style of Scarron, if I may say so, rather than in the great style of Molière. Now let us come to Arnolphe, and speak of the *École des Femmes*. It is the first in date of the great comedies of Molière, that which first placed him in the position he still continues to occupy alone, and, because its intrigue is more amusing, its language more frank, and its philosophy more optimistic, I know several of his devotees who will even now have it to be his masterpiece.

Recently we have heard the amusing proposal that we should talk of the *École des Femmes* as if Molière had entitled it the *Suite de l'École des Maris*. It is equally probable that if the *Misanthrope* was entitled the *Mariage fait et défait* we would not see in it what we do see, and what we have at least the right to wish to see, no more than in *Tartufe*—which should rather have been called the *Imposteur*—if Molière had entitled

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

it, for example, *Une Famille au temps de Louis XIV.* This is a curious way of reasoning. To justify Bossuet from the reproaches made against his *Discours sur l'Histoire universelle*, may we not also propose to speak of it as if he had entitled it *Observations sommaires sur l'Histoire de quelques Peuples anciens!* But titles which have no value when the authors have not cared to give them, as for example *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, have a value when, like the *École des Femmes*, they signify something of themselves; and—I am no doubt very naïve to say so, but it is worth saying—since there are some who hold an opposite opinion.

What then is the “school for wives” according to Molière, and what is the lesson to be derived from his comedy? There is nothing more evident. The “school for wives” is love, or rather it is nature; and the lesson, which is plain enough, is that nature alone will be always stronger than all we can do to thwart its wish. Brought up “in a small convent, far from all experience,” Agnès has nothing for her but to be youth, love, and nature.—It even seems that there is a certain element of unfeelingness in her, not to say of simple perverseness, which I should mistrust if only I was Horace!—More natural and less learned, less lively, too, than the Isabella of the *École des Maris*, she has not and never will have the playful grace of the Henriette of the *Femmes savantes*. As for Arnolphe, Molière himself has been careful to inform us, in speaking of him, “that it is not incompatible for a

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

person to be ridiculous in certain things and an honest man in others." He is not, moreover, an old man, as he seems generally to be imagined, and many people believe themselves young at his age. What he has against him is, then, merely his wish to force nature, and he is foolish, ridiculous, and contemptible only in this point. I say nothing of Horace : among the lovers of Molière's répertoire, there is none more insignificant, whose merit more strictly reduces itself to that of his "flaxen peruke," who is, moreover, more worthy of Agnès. He is young like her, as he is simple, and like her he is nature itself. What could be clearer ? And without passing the limits of his art, without preaching on the stage, how could Molière have told us that we do not change nature in her essence ; that whoever tries to pay for it dearly ; and that consequently the beginning of all our evils is the desire to make the attempt.

For, as to those who refuse this interpretation of the *École des Femmes*, I should be curious to know how they explain the effect it produced and the outburst of resentment which followed. Would the very indecent double meaning of the ribbon scene and the joking about "hell's caldrons" have been sufficient ? Yes, if you will, and on the condition that they signify something else and more than they really do. But, in reality, what contemporaries thought was that comedy, which had, till then, with the Corneilles, Scarron, and Quinault, confined itself to providing amusement

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

by devices in turn ludicrous and romantic, had now, with Molière, puffed itself up, if I may say so, with quite another ambition, and had, for the first time, in the *École des Femmes*, touched indirectly on the great question which then divided men's minds. They recognised in the *École des Femmes* an aim which went further. It seemed to them in short that this poet was overstepping his limits, that he was extending the sphere of his art even to those objects to which it should remain a stranger, and that he was haughtily leaving behind his rôle of "public entertainer." They endeavoured to silence him. Molière replied to them one after the other with the *Critique de l'École des Femmes*, the *Impromptu de Versailles*, and *Tartufe*.

---

### III

#### THE QUESTION OF TARTUFE

As he had written the *Critique de l'École des Femmes* in answer to the pedants and prudes and people like his Lysidas and Climène who "censured his finest work," as he had written the *Impromptu de Versailles* to avenge himself on the comedians of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, who did not scruple to attack even his private life, so Molière seems at first to have thought



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

of *Tartufe* only to reply to those, and at the same time to carry fire and sword into their camp, who accused him of indecency and, above all, of impiety in his *École des Femmes*.

This is what chronology proves. But since *Tartufe* took possession of the stage only in 1669, and since, even now, it is separated, in many editions of Molière, from the *École des Femmes*—by *Don Juan*, which is of the year 1665, by the *Misanthrope*, which is of 1666, by the *Médecin malgré lui* and *Mélicerte*,—the continuity of inspiration which connects the two master-pieces of the work of Molière escapes our view at first, and we do not see, or we forget, that, in the history of the public life of Molière, *Tartufe* is first and foremost a reply and an attack. To make no mistake about it, it is sufficient to remember that, before appearing for the first time in the month of May 1664, *Tartufe* was separated from the *École des Femmes*, which was represented for the first time in the winter of 1662, really by an interval of only fifteen or sixteen months—the time necessary to write it!—and by two or three pieces, which are precisely the *Critique de l'École des Femmes*, the *Impromptu de Versailles*, and the *Mariage forcé*. If the first two are sufficiently well known, we must say of the third that Molière doubtless saw in it—as it was expressly written for the king, and in haste—a means of paying his court and of ranging on his side the all-powerful master on whom his adversaries

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

depended as well as he. A clever courtier indeed was Molière ; this is a point we must remember ; and poor Corneille himself has no humbler dedication than that of the *École des Maris* to the king's brother : "There is nothing so superb as the name I put at the head of this book, and nothing meaner than that which it contains."

This preliminary remark may already throw some light on the true meaning of *Tartufe* and Molière's intentions. It shows at least that *Tartufe*—very different in this respect from *Amphitryon*, for example,—is an act as much as a work : a work of combat, as we would now say, and an act of declared hostility. But against whom ? This is the point. For it is no use repeating that Molière himself declared that it was only against "false coiners of devotion" : I shall first reply that, being himself a party in the case, his evidence cannot be received ; and, should it be received, I would add that there would still be excellent reasons, if not for disbelieving it, yet for acting as if we did disbelieve it. I may be permitted to give only one,—that, without running the almost inevitable risk of losing the good graces of the king, of seeing his company broken up and his theatre closed, of compromising, in short, his peace and his liberty, Molière could not have spoken otherwise. Do you see him glorying in having openly attacked religion ? Voltaire even, in the following century, could hardly dare to do this : and

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

I know some people even in our days who attack it, and do not wish it to be known. And yet *they* have no Bastille to fear! So we need not pay much attention to such statements: for if Molière, when he professed his esteem and his respect for the truly pious, said one thing "while he thought another," and if "that is called lying"—let us have no fear of the word—he lied. Perhaps, too, he did not tell the truth when, in the preface to his *Précieuses*, he said he had attacked only the false *Précieuses*, when, likewise, in the *Critique de l'École des Femmes*, he imputed the double meaning of the ribbon scene to the defiling imagination of those who had pretended to be shocked by it? No more let us pay any attention to the arguments which are drawn from a certain theory of Molière's intentions; let us remember rather that what is to be cleared up is precisely the nature of these intentions; and, taking *Tartufe* in its place in history, let us see where, between 1650 and 1664, were these hypocrites and false religionists, what were the great dangers with which they threatened society, and what were their names?

One always reasons as if there was only one seventeenth century, identical with itself in all the duration of the hundred years of its course, and as if *Tartufe* was contemporary with the reign of Madame de Maintenon, and not with the time when the La Vallières and Montespons were in favour! But in this court where Louis XIV, barely emancipated from the

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

tutelage of his mother, turned his caprice from sultana to sultana, and let his covetousness wander even to his brother's wife ; where around him every man and woman, young and ardent like him, on his example thought only of gallantry, love, and sensuality ; where the severe Colbert even made himself the minister as much of the pleasures as of the business of his master, there were not, there could not be, any hypocrites or false religionists, from the simple reason that devotion there led nobody to anything ; that it would have been not only useless, but imprudent and dangerous, to feign devotion ; and that, unless under the obligation of his business of confessor or preacher, a man would have been suspected, if he did not imitate the conduct of his prince, of censuring it. Let us remember, in this connection, the fate of Madame de Navailles, who was driven from the court—and whose husband was deprived of all his offices—for having walled up the door which put the apartment of Louis XIV in communication with the chamber of the lady's-maids. This is all the profit that a man of hypocritical or sincere piety could hope to gain from devotion, and I leave it to the reader to think if there were many who were eager for it. Hypocrisy is not one of those vices which are self-originated, and certainly not one of those which bring their own gratification, as avarice, ambition, or debauchery. It does not live for its wry mouth, like Harpagon by the sight of his gold. And it has no reason or cause for existence, but in so

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

far as it leads to certain solid satisfactions—to fortune, honour, and reputation.

But if there were no people of false piety at the court of the young Louis XIV, there were others of true piety, who saddened at the sight of this other kind of “libertinism”; and I do not suppose that we dispute them the right to have been sincerely sad—and more than sad, to have been scandalised—since, after a lapse of two hundred years, we still allow it, in their *Histories of France*, to the grave Henri Martin and the lyrical Michelet. And these truly pious people were not called the Abbé de Pons, or the Abbé Roquette, or the Sieur Charpy de Sainte-Croix, as the annotators or commentators of *Tartufe* repeat *ad nauseam*; they were of higher origin, of another class, and more troublesome and irksome to the king himself and to Molière. First, there was the queen mother, Anne of Austria, the secret witness of the tears of the young queen Marie-Thérèse, who feared to see Louis XIV endanger, by the hazards of his easy love affairs, his health especially, the glory of his reign in this world, and his safety in the next. There was the Prince de Conti—from whom Molière is usually said to have taken the model and the measure of his Don Juan—and there was his sister, the Duchesse de Longueville, both now converted, and whose entire sincerity cannot, for any reason that I know, be doubted. There was also that eloquent abbé who began to preach, or rather to thunder, in the pulpits of Paris,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

against *The love of worldly pleasures*—the future Bishop of Condom and of Meaux, the future teacher of the Dauphin—till the time came for him to write his *Maximes sur la Comédie*. And, in the town as at the court, there were the Jansenists, a Desmares and a Singlin, the people of Port-Royal, those of the “party,” as was then said; there was the honest and gentle Nicole, there was Arnauld, there was this austere and passionate Christian who used what strength was left him to scrawl the fragments of his book of *Pensées*—there was Pascal; and I have named only the most important.

Those were the enemies or the adversaries of Molière, the people of true and not of false piety, those whom the brilliancy of the success of the *École des Femmes* had made to murmur, and those above all whose indignation and credit threatened or could threaten the liberty of his art. From every sort of motive Molière feared that the pious—“the good and truly pious, whom we ought to follow”—might some day restrain the vivacity of this satire, if even they did not go the length of quenching it.

“I await respectfully the judgment which your Majesty will deign to pronounce on this matter”—so may be read in the second *Placet* relating to *Tartufe*, that of 1667,—“but certain it is that I must no longer think of making comedies if the Tartufes gain the day, for they will claim the right thereby of persecuting me more than ever, and will try to find something

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

to cavil at even in the most innocent things that will come from my pen." We read likewise in the triumphant preface of 1669: "Either the comedy of *Tartufe* must be approved, or all comedies in general must be condemned. . . . This is what people have insisted on so furiously of late, and never were they more incensed against the theatre."

Therein lay the danger for Molière. He doubted, instinctively, that Jansenism might do for the drama what Puritanism had done in England. And as for us, we must undoubtedly congratulate ourselves that Jansenism did not succeed, but we must not deny that Molière, in writing *Tartufe*, attacked Jansenism, and in Jansenism, as we shall now see, religion itself.

This would never be doubted but for the accepted custom of considering in *Tartufe* only Tartufe himself; and when Tartufe only is considered there is no trouble in showing that he really is Tartufe and a hypocrite. "The traitor is to be plainly seen through his mask; he is recognised at once in his true colours; and the rolling of his eyes and his honeyed tones impose"—only on Madame Pernelle, an old fool, and her son Orgon. Tartufe sweats hypocrisy: all the meaner lusts are concentrated in him as it were to make him a monster of moral deformity; however comic he be, he inspires fear, and disgust perhaps even more than fear; to touch him we would wish a pair of tongs;

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

and on meeting him on our way we would take care not to run up against him, for fear of befouling ourselves. The intention here is manifest beyond doubt. Tartufe is the satire or caricature of hypocrisy; the expressions he uses could not for a moment deceive anybody; and if one were to dare to offer any criticism on Molière, it would be, with La Bruyère, that he has painted him in too crude colours. But what is to be made of the other characters, and of Orgon in particular, who is undoubtedly of distinct importance, for we must remember that it was not the character of Tartufe, but of Orgon, which Molière interpreted in his piece, just as he acted Arnolphe in the *École des Femmes*, Alceste in the *Misanthrope*, and Harpagon in the *Avare*? And it is really on Orgon, as much as on Tartufe, that the whole piece turns; it is he who keeps the stage from the first act to the last, while Tartufe appears only at the third; and for a clear understanding of affairs, it is from him consequently, as much as from Tartufe, that we must ask Molière's secret.

Now Orgon was by no means a simpleton, and Dorine, from the first act, took great care to tell us so. "During our troubles he acted like a man of sense and displayed some courage in the service of his prince." His house was free and hospitable, and the presence of a mother-in-law had brought neither disorder nor trouble. A good husband, a good father, a



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

good master was Orgon : he was also a good citizen. A faithful and sure friend, he was chosen from among twenty others to be entrusted with a matter on which depended a friend's honour, liberty, and life. "But since he has taken so strongly to Tartufe, he has become a perfect dolt." That is to say, since he met him, all his former good qualities had turned into as many faults. Instead of being the indulgent husband of a young wife, he had become indifferent and crotchety ; the tender father had changed into a domestic tyrant ; the man of honour into an unfaithful guardian. What is this to say—for Orgon is sincere, his devotion is true, and not for a moment is he made to appear as a dishonest man, and still less as a hypocrite—what is this to say but that as much as he advances in devotion, so much does he advance towards inhumanity ? Now, "he could see brother, children, mother, and wife die, without troubling himself one whit," as he said while hitting his nail on his teeth ; and Tartufe alone accomplished this work, not the Tartufe, let it be understood, who covets his wife while marrying his daughter, but the Tartufe who can barely be seen, he whose lessons teach only, according to the language of Christianity, no heed of the things of this world, self-denial, and the pure love of God.

These words put us on the track of what Molière attacks in religion ; the point is delicate enough, but it is important to mark it. Is it dogma ? Cer-

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

tainly not, although for that matter he thinks, with the "libertines" of his time, men like Des Barreaux or Saint Pavin, that "to oblige a man of sense to believe in all that is in the Bible, even to the tail of Tobias's dog, is absolutely absurd." Perhaps it is the evils which fanaticism has caused in history? No again, although this idea, which passes for Voltaire's, is already in Lucretius, one of Molière's favourite authors, under whose shelter he could have hidden himself.

*Tantum religio potuit suadere malorum.*

Or is it then morality, I mean to say the common morality, the morality in vogue, the morality of honest folk, that which is usually said to be sufficient for the affairs of life? No, not even that! Molière is an honest fellow too, and much more an honest fellow than his friend La Fontaine; and if he never taught anything very lofty or noble—and this after all is not the business of comedy—he at least taught nothing which, in appearance, is not wise and reasonable.

But what he does not like in religion is that which is opposed to his philosophy, the principle on which all religion worthy of its name reposes, the constraint, in short, which it places on us. While all around him, not only the Jansenists, but the Jesuits also, are teaching that human nature is corrupted in its substance; that we carry in ourselves our most dangerous enemies, and that these are our instincts; that in

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

following their impulse we run of our own accord to eternal damnation ; that there is no hope of safety but in keeping a tight rein on them ; that the life of this world has been given us not to be used, and that nature is a perpetual source of combat, struggle, and victory over herself,—Molière believes, as we have shown, precisely the reverse. He believes “that we must refuse our body or our senses nothing which they desire of us in the exercise of their powers or natural faculties” ; he believes that in following our instincts we obey the wish of nature ; and, since we ourselves form part of nature, he believes that one cannot tell if there is more insolence and pride, or stupidity and folly, in wishing to live not merely apart from her, but in opposition to her.

Is the contrast not evident or even glaring ? Will it not be granted that it is the moral constraint which is the foundation of religion—and had alone been so since the appearance of Calvinism and Jansenism—which Molière attacked in his *Tartufe* under the name of hypocrisy ? Did he not wish to show us that in teaching us to “set our hearts on nothing,” religion taught us to neglect, not so much ourselves as these “human sentiments” which give life its value ? Did he not wish to show, in short, that pious people, whether sincere or hypocritical, are always dangerous ; that in proposing for the efforts of men an end which is unattainable, they dissuade them from their true duties ; and that in preaching, as

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

they do, the contempt and dread of this world, they turn us from the object of life, which is first of all to live?

Here it is, I know, that the sayings of Cléante are appealed to: "There is false devotion as there is false bravery: and as we never find that the truly brave are those who make much noise where honour leads them, so the good and truly pious, in whose footsteps we should follow, are not those who pull so many long faces." But, to appeal to these lines, it would first be necessary to show that they, and the speeches of Cléante generally, are the expression of the true thought of Molière. Now this cannot be, no more than Molière can be held answerable for the Alceste or the Philinte of his *Misanthrope*; and when, too, the Chrysalde of the *École des Femmes* is mentioned in this connection, we forget, if this good fellow really spoke in the name of Molière, what is the strange advice which Molière would thus have given us, and that it would justify the most violent passages of the *Maximes sur la Comédie*.

Indeed the "raisonneurs" of his plays do not act the part of the chorus of the ancient comedy; they express a part of his thought only, that which he believes most in accordance with the prejudices of his public; and their speeches are but a bait for the pit. And so what is the distinction Cléante endeavours to establish between the sincere and the hypocritical in religion? The hypocritical, to him,

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

are all those who make a show, if I may say so, who act openly in some way or other, who do not conceal their devoutness as a weakness or a crime. But the sign of the sincere is to show no devoutness, to be content to be devout in themselves, and, provided they live a good life, to let others live as they wish. In other terms still, the mark of true piety, for Cléante, is to be concerned only with piety. As soon as religion aims at raising itself into a guide for life, he begins to suspect it, as he also says, of ostentation and insincerity. And this is why, were a new demonstration needed of Molière's intentions, it would be found in the speeches and rôle of that character whom we are told to consider his interpreter.

So had he really wished to shelter his *Tartufe* from malevolent interpretations, I shall not have the impertinence to say how he ought to have set about it, but it is not Cléante whom he would have chosen to speak in his name ; it is Elmire, the wife of Orgon, whose tractable and sincere devotion he would have opposed to the devotion, sincere too, but extravagant, of her booby of a husband. It is she, since he has entrusted her with unmasking Tartufe, whom he would likewise have entrusted with expressing his respect for these sentiments of which the language of Tartufe is only a sacrilegious parody, she, and not Cléante, who takes no part in the action, who speaks only behind the scenes, and who could easily be taken out of the piece without being missed.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

So at least has he done in the *Misanthrope*, where the sincere Eliante decides between Alceste and Philinte, and fills, between the coquettishness of Célimène and the prudery of Arsinoé, the part of nature and truth. So also has he done in the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, and so in the *Femmes savantes*, where it is not the old fellow Chrysale, nor his brother-in-law Ariste, nor even perhaps Clitandre, but Henriette in especial, who incarnates his true thought.

But the Elmire of *Tartufe* is only a pleasant woman, to whom every religious idea may be said to appear a stranger, who cannot find any of the necessary words to reply to the gross declaration of Tartufe. "Others would perhaps take it in a different fashion; but she wishes to show her discretion"; and since, moreover, her virtue is not the less unimpeachable for it, what is this to say but that by nature "men that are free have an instinct and spur that prompteth them unto virtuous actions, and withdraws them from vice"? In her difficult situation as the young wife of an old husband, as the mother-in-law of a grown-up girl and a grown-up man, to avoid giving any handle to slander and to remain thoroughly honest, Elmire had only to follow her nature, and had not the least need of correcting or conquering it, or even of trying to bring it to perfection.

Contemporaries — and their impressions must be

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

trusted—made no mistake about it; and five days after the first performance of *Tartufe*, the *Gazette de France*, in the issue of 17th May 1664, declared the piece “absolutely injurious to religion, and capable of producing very dangerous effects.” Molière, now that he had the support of the king, showed his boldness by replying with his *Don Juan*. He did better still; he profited by the quarrels of his adversaries; he had the tact to persuade the Jesuits that his *Tartufe* was a retort to the *Lettres provinciales*, and to persuade the Jansenists that it was the continuation or redoubling of these *Lettres*. It is Racine who tells us, in the oft-cited sentence, that “the Jansenists said that the Jesuits were represented in that comedy, but the Jesuits flattered themselves that it was aimed at the Jansenists.” And, indeed, when *Tartufe* comes upon the stage, speaking the verse:

Laurent, put by my hair-shirt and my scourge;

as also when he says, in offering his handkerchief to Dorine:

Go hide thy bosom, for I hate the sight,

it seems as if it were a Jansenist who spoke. On the other hand, was it not the Jesuit who was represented in his turn when *Tartufe* ardently explained to Elmire “the art of rectifying the evil of the act by the purity of the intention”?

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

But the truth, which accords better with all we have just seen, was that Molière had made no distinction; and the fact is that he mixed up every pious person, every enemy of the theatre, every foe to nature, one and all—Jansenists and Jesuits, Escobar and Arnauld, Pascal and Bourdaloue—in his bold derision of devotion, or rather of religion itself. If there could ever have been any mistake, this was recognised by all, when, in 1669, after many difficulties, *Tartufe* at last appeared publicly on the stage. The test of the representation decided the meaning of the piece. Jesuits or Jansenists, each alike felt the attack; and this is forgotten by those who, even at this day, can see in *Tartufe* only a machine directed against Port-Royal: they forget that nobody was more indignant at it, nor expressed more eloquently the painful indignation of every truly pious person, than Bourdaloue, in his *Sermon sur l'Hypocrisie*.

As to the question of discovering now if Molière deceived Louis XIV, and if the king, throughout the whole affair, was the dupe of his valet-de-chambre—it may be pretty, but it is stupid; and, to ask it in these terms, is to be oneself the dupe of mere words. For why should Molière have deceived Louis XIV, or why should Louis XIV have been wanting in discernment? But we know, all the same, that if the king did not see the danger, he suspected it, since he hesitated for five years to allow the representation of *Tartufe*; and Molière, on his side, had



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

no occasion to deceive his master : he was uneasy only about his own pleasures, and in the enemies of the theatre he could see only the silent censors of his own failings.

But, in this connection, has it not even been held that Louis XIV commanded *Tartufe* of Molière? Rapin says so in his curious *Memoirs*. What at least is certain, is that religion, at all times, before being a rule for the inner life, was for Louis XIV an affair of State. Long after *Tartufe*, in the question of the liberties of the Gallican Church, he was to have no fear in threatening to drive it even to schism, if need be, in order to bring about the triumph of his religious policy. A power apart, he never let any opportunity pass of making the representatives of religion feel that his wish should remain always above it. And if, from many reasons, we do not believe that he occasioned *Tartufe*, everything allows us to hold that, when Molière gave him the opportunity, he availed himself of it as a tool of government.

Whether they were sincere or hypocritical, Louis always suspected these pious people of wishing to impose on him a will other than his own, perhaps even of aiming, like the Protestants hitherto, at forming a party, a state within a state. After long hesitation—which he conceded chiefly on the entreaties of his mother, or perhaps on those of the Archbishop of Paris, M. de Péréfixe, his old tutor, and M. de Lamoignon—he let *Tartufe* be acted. And knowing

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

that the piece was "likely to produce very strange effects," he doubtless believed himself strong enough to prevent things going further than he wished, but he was the dupe of nobody; or rather it is precisely because he had measured the probable consequences of the comedy that he ended by authorising its representation.

Is this, moreover, not what is understood when he is praised for "having gained on that day one of the most glorious victories of his reign"? For, otherwise, what could be said, and for what could he be praised? Yet he is praised for having better understood, in spite of fanatics, if there were any at his court, the true interests of religion than all the people of sincere and deep religion who were about him. It was they who made the mistake in thinking themselves attacked and wounded by *Tartufe*. They did not understand Molière. In distinguishing false devotion from the true, "the mask from the person," and "the false money from the good," they did not see the service which that "reforming comedy" rendered to the cause of religion. But Louis XIV saw it, since he was, as it were, outside of and above the dispute; he is praised for having had the courage to join in it; and we, to-day, pretend to see even better what he saw so well.

Need I show the absurdity of this position, and that of itself it could be an adequate interpretation to us of the true intention of Molière? To "acquit" *Tartufe*,

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

it supposes, indeed, that where the Bossuets and Bourdaloues saw nothing, it is we, dramatic critics and lecturers in the Odéon, sons of Voltaire and of the eighteenth century—who make use of religion, when we do make use of it, only on the day of our marriage or burial, with the accompaniment of baritones and sopranos—it is we who know, who see clearly, who can say exactly where religion ends and hypocrisy begins! But if we were sincere, or rather if we only took the trouble to think, we would realise that what pleases us in *Tartufe* is just Molière's effort to separate morality from religion. We have no need of a rule of good life, and certainly not of a rule outside of and above nature: this is what *Tartufe* teaches clearly enough, and this is what we like in the usual interpretation. We are very pleased to see all those who labour to correct their nature fall, like Orgon and his mother, into absurdity and folly; and, on the other hand, we admire, in the honesty of Elmire and the good sense of Dorine, the beauty of our indifference. But it would be time also to recognise that this is the opposite of religion. It would be time above all to acknowledge that, if it is the opposite, the truly pious people have the right to feel hurt by *Tartufe*; that if the wound has not closed for two hundred and fifty years, there is no doubt that it was deep; that the hand which made it meant to make it; that therefore it was not only false devotion, but also true, which Molière meant to attack; and

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

that it was for the gain of nature that he meant to destroy the religion of effort and moral constraint.

---

### IV

#### THE APOLOGY OF NATURE

THE last comedies of Molière, far from belying this definition of his philosophy, confirm it, and in the author of *George Dandin*, the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, or the *Malade imaginaire*, with all his genius, there is still to be found the thought of the author of the *École des Femmes*. Consider only the place and rôle—not of the lady's-maids but the servants, which is not at all the same thing—of Nicole in the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, or Martine, too, in the *Femmes savantes*, true daughters of nature if there ever were, who do not try to be witty, like Nérine in *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* or Dorine in *Tartufe*, but whose artless good sense escapes in proverbial sallies, and who make us laugh, and are comic or droll, only by force of being true. Does it not seem that they are there to tell us that all that is known as instruction or education is useless where nature is wanting, and cannot, wherever she does exist, but thwart and falsify her? A single word from them is sufficient to disconcert the novel science of M. Jourdain, or close the mouth

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

of the majestic Philaminte ; and this word they did not search for ; it was suggested to them by nature, that nature which their masters, in their attempts at improvement, have, as we see, only changed, disfigured, and corrupted. Or again, while their masters sink, at each step, deeper in absurdities, they attract us by, if I may say so, their simplicity, their ignorance, and their naturalness.

Consider also the nature of the subjects and the lesson to be drawn from them. In this respect, the last of Molière's comedies—this *Malade imaginaire* which has sometimes been wrongly placed, with *Pourceaugnac* and *Scapin*, among his farces—is perhaps the most instructive. The cause has often been asked of Molière's strange animosity against medicine and doctors. Were the Purgons and Diafoiruses then also “one of the scourges of the century,” and, in ridiculing them on the stage with unmeasured liberty—of which there is not a single blow that does not strike their successors—did Molière believe that he was doing public health the same service as he did morality in attacking the Tartufes? Or shall we say that, having himself proved the uselessness of their prescriptions and the vanity of their art, he only relieved himself at their expense—from his *Don Juan* to his *Malade imaginaire*—of a valetudinarian's rancour ! No ; but the truth is that in his eyes the pretensions of doctors are no less absurd in their own way than those of bigots. They also, like bigots,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS •

believe themselves stronger and cleverer than nature, and pride themselves, likewise, on restoring and rectifying her, and, when necessary, on improving her. With their remedies, like the others with their long faces, they believe themselves clever enough to thwart her workings; they promise us, if we will only listen, to give us back, with their bleedings, purgings, and bathings, the powers which we have lost; and this matter, which, according to the expression of Lucretius, nature incessantly demands for other uses, they flatter themselves on fixing, so to speak, and eternising in us. Is this not actually what Béralde says so well in a long scene of the *Malade imaginaire*, which is very carefully abridged when acted, and from which, for this reason, I take the liberty of reproducing a few lines.

“If we leave nature alone,” he says, “she recovers gently of herself from the disorder into which she has fallen”; and as Argan replies that one may still “assist this nature by certain things,” he answers with an insistence and harshness which are new: “Good heavens, brother, these are mere ideas, with which we love to beguile ourselves. When a doctor speaks to you of aiding, assisting, and comforting nature, of taking away from her what annoys her and giving her what she lacks, of re-establishing her and putting her in the full command of her functions; when he speaks to you of purifying the blood, of regulating the bowels and the brain, of reducing the spleen,

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

of putting the chest in order, of strengthening the heart, and of having secrets for prolonging life to an advanced age, he is just telling you the romance of medicine.”

These words seem characteristic enough, and while they throw light on the folly of Argan—which is to wish to be ill in spite of nature—there is no doubt as to where they lead us. If Molière was no less bitter and passionate against doctors than against pedants and hypocrites, his reasons are the same, or rather they are identical. He inveighs against all, no matter what they be, a Purgon or a Trissotin, a Vadius or a Tartufe, who do not follow nature, even when their pretensions are not so extravagant as to aim at combatting her. It is they who will fall; and it will be enough for Sganarelle or Toinette to don the robe or wear the pointed bonnet to know as much as all the Diafoiruses in the world, as the natural honesty of Elmire was enough to outplay the plans of Tartufe, as it was enough for Agnès to be instructed by nature to be able to outplay the politics of Arnolphe. For, once again, they are not fools, or, if we prefer Molière’s expression, they are not “bêtes,” these Arnolphes, Tartufes, and Purgons. The last in particular “have, for the most part, a good deal of classical learning, can speak in fine Latin, can name all the diseases in Greek, and can define and classify them.” But, “as for curing them, they know nothing about that,” and never will know,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

and nature, cleverer than all their tricks, will of herself triumph in the long run.

This is the more surprising, considering that life was not always pleasant for Molière, and that he lacked neither annoyances, nor humiliations, nor troubles too of every sort. If his irregular and roving youth had been little more to him than a long apprenticeship in the contempt which was then meted out to the comedian, the favour even of Louis XIV was unable to protect him, in his maturity, from the usually refined but sometimes brutal insolence of the people of the court, and still less from the grossness of the pit. I say nothing of the difficulties or quarrels he had, in his position of company manager, with his rival comedians, with his actors, with his authors, or, as author himself, with his adversaries and detractors. Molière's enemies did not injure him: and after all, to fight as he did, in returning blow for blow—in replying to the *Portrait du Peintre* by the *Impromptu de Versailles*, or to the prohibition of *Tartufe* by the writing of *Don Juan*—is a way to feel the pleasure of living.

But, on the other hand, we know the worries of his domestic life, and, without troubling to defend or attack once more the virtue of Armande Béjart, we know, and cannot doubt, what Molière suffered by having married her. Younger than him by twenty years, coquettish, light-headed, fast perhaps, and dragging after her a train of admirers whose "fair



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

hair, long nail, and falsetto voice had been able to find the secret of charming her," Mdlle. Molière taught her husband the reality of these tortures of jealousy and this humiliation of loving what is despised, which he has himself so often expressed :

"Strange thing it is to love, and that men should be subject to such weakness for these traitresses. . . . Their mind is wicked, and their soul is weak ; there is nothing more feeble, more stupid, more faithless ; yet, despite all that, everything in the world is done for these creatures !"

How many times must Molière have repeated to himself these lines of his *École des Femmes* ! Things went so far as to lead to a separation, and, from 1666 to 1671, Molière and his wife saw each other only at the theatre.

Further, his illness began to add to all the causes for his being discontented with others and with himself, and, if it cannot be said that from this very year 1666 he began to die slowly, it is at least true that from this time he lost, never to recover it again, the cheerful good humour of his earlier years. Life, which up to then had been "equally mingled with sweetness and pleasure," had no longer for him "any moment of satisfaction or sweetness" ; and, when he had to quit it, so well was he prepared, that death doubtless came to him as a deliverance.

This explains the characteristics of his last pieces—of some of them at least—of this *Malade imaginaire*

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

of which we were speaking, of the *Bourgeois Gentleman*, and *George Dandin*. The satire is plainly more harsh, the mirth more bitter, and, if I may say so, the laughter more conclusive. Even the import is different.

No doubt the question was to be treated differently later, but has Rousseau himself shown up more eloquently the iniquity in the differences of men's circumstances than the author of *George Dandin*? For what would be more immoral than *George Dandin*, if in this did not lie its true meaning and its true lesson? And has the author of *Candide* ever treated "this beggarly life" more outrageously than the author of the *Malade imaginaire*? What do I say,—the author of *Candide*? It is the author of *Gulliver* I should say; it is of Swift that I think every time I see the *Malade imaginaire* acted, it is of the bold, cynical, and violent character of his jesting. Read and re-read the *Malade imaginaire* from any point of view; take all its characters one after the other; Argan himself, and Béline, and Angélique, and M. Bonnefoi, and Toinette, and the Purgons, and the Diafoiruses, even the little Louison, never did Molière, unless perhaps in his *Avare*, place together on the stage a like collection of imbeciles or rogues; and never really—still excepting his *Avare*—did he mark with stronger touch the stupidity and rascality which is often hidden under the apparent regularity and respectability of bourgeois virtue. As he was by birth

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

naturally melancholy, as has been remarked, we are almost tempted to believe that his naturalism would have ended, had he lived longer, by turning, as with some of our contemporaries, to a sort of pessimism. It is a curious mirth that shows itself in *George Dandin* and the *Malade imaginaire*, a scornful and unkind mirth, the mirth of those who force themselves to laugh, from fear of being obliged to weep.

If however, amongst all this, the philosophy of Molière is, as we have seen, still present, and still the same ; if he cannot keep from returning, between two domestic scenes or two tiffs, to the vindication of nature ; if he continues to scoff at those who wish to encroach on the rights of this mother of all health, of all wisdom, of all virtue, how must this philosophy have been at his heart, and must he not have been much more deeply imbued with it than he himself believed ! Listen rather to the Angélique of *George Dandin* : “ With your permission, I would play with the happy days which youth offers me, and take the sweet liberties which age permits.” This is still the language of the *École des Femmes*. Neither the experiences of life nor the sorrows of his last years had any effect on that.

How shall we best pursue what makes for pleasure ?

This is the cry of nature ; and when one knows men, when one has judged them, when one has himself experienced the vanity of things, how shall we cling

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

yet more closely to his principle? Is it not then, above all, that life seems good, and then, before she escapes us, that we hasten to enjoy her? So let us follow nature. This is Molière's rule of rules—I mean that which determines the others, and on which they all necessarily hinge: and the end of this work thus joins on to the beginning. I have only to show that, as soon as he was dead, it was in this way that he was understood, and, as his work still lives, it only remains for me to state the place it gives Molière in the history of ideas.

---

### V

#### THE COMEDY OF MOLIÈRE IN THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

“M. MOLIÈRE,” says the learned Baillet in his *Jugements des Savants*, “is one of the most dangerous enemies that the age or the world has raised up against the church, and he is the more formidable as he still makes after his death the same havoc in the heart of his readers as he made in his lifetime in that of his spectators. . . . Gallantry is not the only science to be learned in the school of Molière, but also the most ordinary maxims of licentiousness against the true sentiments of religion, whatever the enemies of bigotry may say, and we can assert that his *Tartufe* is one of the least

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

dangerous to lead us to *irreligion*”—it is Baillet who underlines—“the seeds of which are scattered in so cunning and hidden a way in most of his other pieces, that we may affirm that it is infinitely more difficult to resist its influence there than where he openly and indiscriminately ridicules the bigoted and the devout.”

When these lines appeared, in 1686, twelve or thirteen years after Molière's death, no voice was raised, as far as I know, to protest against Baillet's judgment. If there was a party of libertinism or irreligion, nobody then doubted that the author of *Tartufe* had belonged to it ; none of his contemporaries made any mistake about the character of his work ; and nobody, in short, would then have dared to pretend that the blows he had aimed at the bigots had not struck, at the same time, the pious and religion itself. One question alone remains : what had become, during the last sixty years, of the doctrine bequeathed to Molière by his masters, and transmitted to them, as we have seen, from Montaigne and Rabelais ?

There is no lack of information ; and, if it was not against libertines, I should like to know against whom it was that Pascal had thought of writing, even before the appearance of Molière, that *Apologie de la Religion chrétienne* of which the *Pensées* are the fragments. Since for more than a hundred years the editors of the *Pensées* have arranged them in an order which is the more arbitrary the more it differs from that of the edition of

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

1670, published by Port-Royal, it has been and is still too often believed that Pascal wrote for himself, without other intention than to resolve his own doubts and to be assured on the foundations of his belief. But it is sufficient to go back to the edition of 1670, and to re-read in it the celebrated fragment *Contre l'Indifférence des Athées* to be assured that, if death had not come to interrupt it, the *Apologie de la Religion chrétienne* was to have been, like the *Provinciales*, primarily a polemic, and that, after "easy-going piety," it was libertinism that Pascal proposed to combat.

"I know not who has sent me into the world," he makes the free-thinker say, "nor what is the world, nor what I am myself. . . . As I know not whence I come, so I know not whither I go, and I only know that on leaving this world I fall for ever into nothingness, or into the hands of an angry God. . . . And from all that I conclude that I ought therefore to pass all the days of my life without thinking of what must happen to me, and that I have only to follow my inclinations without thought or anxiety, . . . and in treating with scorn those who would be troubled with another care, I will proceed without foresight and without fear, . . . and let myself be gently led to death, uncertain of the eternity of my future condition." (*Pensées*. Edition of 1670. *Contre l'Indifférence des Athées*, 1-8.)

Here we recognise the language of Montaigne. I

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

cannot say that it was also that of Descartes ; I have endeavoured to show, however, in another essay,\* that with his tendency to treat as science the truths of religion and the rules of morality, Descartes did not fail to assist the progress of indifference and libertinism. Or rather what was, before his time, merely a way of living just as it was a fashion of thought, he founded, if I may say so, on reason, and consequently on right ; and though the libertines did not fall in exactly with Cartesianism, they found in it the excuse and justification of their usual rules of conduct.

This is proved by a passage in Spinoza, in that *Ethic*, where I can see, on the whole, only a doctrine of liberation, and, as in the *De Natura Rerum* of Lucretius, an endeavour to emancipate human life from the terrors with which it is oppressed by the vain phantoms of superstition. In the name of Cartesianism and epicureanism, then banded together against religion, is it not really to Pascal, is it not to the *Pensées*, which had appeared five or six years earlier, is it not to the Christian moralists—Protestants or Jansenists—that Spinoza replies in the following lines ?

“ Most of those who have hitherto treated of human passion and morality seem to have spoken of them, not at all as things which are *natural and regulated accordingly by the laws of nature*, but as things which are *outside*

\* “ Jansénistes et Cartésiens,” in the fourth series of the *Études critiques sur l'histoire de la littérature française*.—Translator.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

*of nature.* Or rather, they represent man in nature as one empire within another. . . . This is why, far from attributing the inconstancy or feebleness of man to the laws of nature, they impute them to some vice or other of human nature, which accordingly some bemoan and others deride or despise, *or end by hating.*" (*Ethics* III., Preamble.)

This was the case of the Protestants in whose midst lived the author of the *Ethics*, the case of the Jansenists, and the case also of the author of the *Pensées*. But this is also the explicit and authentic evidence of the progress which the philosophy of nature had made in the first half of the seventeenth century, and this we must know, if we wish to know exactly what was, between 1660 and 1680, the substance of the thought of our "libertines."

They did not exactly believe that nature was good, in the sense that the author of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* and of *Émile* was to understand it, but no more did they believe that she was bad. They held only that she was nature, that her inspirations or counsels could not differ in general from those of wisdom :

Nunquam aliud natura, aliud sapientia dicit ;

and they said in particular—it is the expression of La Mothe Le Vayer, one of Molière's intimate friends—that to try to resist her is to attempt to row against the current. Not that we should always follow her, or always obey her impulses :



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

What once a Greek to great Augustus spake,  
We may for counsel just and useful take :  
That when to angry noise your words would tend,  
Run o'er your alphabet from end to end ;  
The while to gentler mood your thoughts will move,  
And 'scape the follies which your shame would prove.

The counsels of nature are not always happy, and they are not always clear. But, in refusing to follow her, we must at least be careful not to thwart her, and to identify nothing with her movements that is not taken or deduced from her herself, if I may say so, and derived from her essentials. We should therefore not tell a man to separate himself from nature, but rather to conform to her, to use her as the members do the stomach, to remember that, being of her, he lives only by her, and, in short, never to treat her as a hostile power. But is it this that every religion teaches, and, like religion, every discipline which does not place in life itself, and in the pleasure of living, the object and end of life? The consequence is evident, and there is no need for me here to state it at length.

It was of this philosophy, so clearly defined and so precise, that Molière was the interpreter, and these are the "cunning and hidden seeds of irreligion" which Baillet discovered in almost all his comedies. The partisans of this philosophy were more numerous in the seventeenth century than is generally believed, and—to take but one example—the *Contes* and *Fables* even of his friend La Fontaine insinuate it no less subtly than

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

do the masterpieces of Molière. One and all, with a consciousness more or less clear of their own work, whether indifferents or sceptics, libertines or atheists, for those were the names they were then given, they continued the pagan tradition of the Renaissance, and, by an effort opposed to that of the Pascals, Bossuets, and Bourdaloues, worked at unchristianising the spirit of the seventeenth century, or, if I may use the word, at laicising its thought. Are they to be praised or blamed for it? This is a question I shall not examine, and I shall confine myself to saying that, in preaching the liberty of thought, the two greatest of them, La Fontaine and Molière, are suspected with good reason of having preached the liberty of morals. If they themselves are not what was called in the language of the time "passionate unbelievers"—and for that matter are they not this?—their doctrine has yet always this against it, that it gave the passions full play. But I am now treating the question only historically; and, whatever may be thought of their influence, we are concerned for the moment only with determining its nature. Now the naturalism they represent is of such importance in the history of ideas in the seventeenth century, since it balanced the power of Jansenism, and did not work in the same direction as Cartesianism, that it is to be considered as a third current which must be carefully distinguished from the other two.

If we have seen above how the spirit of the six-

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

teenth century became that of the seventeenth, we now see how the spirit of the seventeenth became in its turn that of the eighteenth. This I shall endeavour to show some day with more precision and clearness. But in the meantime it is sufficient to remember that it is there that Voltaire and Diderot, for example, have their true origin. I do not speak of Rousseau; Rousseau comes from elsewhere; but Voltaire and Diderot are there in their entirety. Though I have already pointed this out, there will be no harm in repeating it: it is Pascal that Voltaire, with a singular clearness of view, attacked first of all, from 1728, and it is first of all against the *Pensées*, or against Jansenism, that he renewed the combat of *Tartufe* and the *École des Femmes*. The Jesuits made the remarkable blunder of encouraging him, as Louis XIV had formerly encouraged Molière. It was really in the name of respectability, that he also, Voltaire, wrote in his *Remarques sur les Pensées de Pascal*:

“Man is no enigma, as you make him, in order that you may have the pleasure of solving it: *man seems to be in his place in nature*. Superior to the animals, whom he resembles only in his organs, inferior to other beings, whom he probably resembles in thought, he is, like everything we see, a mixture of good and evil, of pleasure and pain: he is provided with passions to act, and reason to govern his actions. . . . And these so-called contrarieties which you call ‘contradictions’ are the necessary ingredients

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

for the composition of man, *who is, like the rest of nature, what he ought to be.*" (Ed. Beuchot, xxxvii, p. 36.)

Molière had not said anything else by the mouth of the reasonable Philinte of the *Misanthrope*: "I take men calmly just as they are; I accustom myself to bear with what they do; and I believe that at the court, as well as in the city, my phlegm is as philosophical as your bile."

This is only the excuse for nature, so to speak; it is not the apotheosis, nor the religion of nature. Voltaire in many respects still belongs to the seventeenth century, and, brought up as he was in Jansenism, he believes no more than Molière in the goodness of nature. He believes only, first in the uselessness, and then in the cruelty of the means which men have thought upon to combat nature, and which end only in being defeated. But Diderot goes further; he gives a prominence to this religion of nature, which, with Voltaire and Molière, was as yet only a far away consequence of its first principle; and he does so much more openly and boldly than Rousseau.

"Dost thou wish to know on every occasion"—says Orou to the chaplain, in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*—"dost thou wish to know what is good and what is bad? Consider the nature of things and actions, thy connections with thy fellow-creatures, the influence of thy conduct on thy personal usefulness

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

and on the public good. *Thou art mad if thou dost believe that there is anything above, below, or in the universe, which can add to or take away from the laws of nature.* Her eternal wish is that the good be preferred to the evil, and the public good to the private good. Thou shalt order the contrary, but thou shalt not be obeyed. Thou shalt multiply the evil-doers and the unfortunate by fear, punishment, and remorse ; *thou shalt deprave the consciences, thou shalt corrupt the minds.* Troubled in their state of innocence, tranquil in their crime, they will have lost the pole-star on their way. Answer me sincerely : despite the express orders of thy three legislators—God, the priest, and the magistrate—does a young man in thy country never have his girl without their permission ?” (Ed. Assézat & Tourneux, II., p. 198.)

I ask pardon for this last line. Obligated as we believe ourselves to be, when we cite Diderot, to cite always only the half of what he says, we have as a result an insufficient knowledge of his personality ; and here, in particular, I rather fear the true bearing of the quotation would not have been gathered, had I not given it entirely.

Characteristic as this is of the usual form of Diderot's tendencies when he moralises, it seems to me to be no less characteristic of the consequences to which the superstition of nature, sooner or later, must inevitably lead. Diderot here joins Rabelais, and his dream of Otaiti leads us, if I may say so,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

back to the Abbey of Thélème. Shaken in its foundations by the paganism of the Renaissance, of which Luther, and Calvin above all, in vain endeavoured to stay the progress; compromised and discredited by the very bitterness of the theological quarrels of the seventeenth century; restored for barely fifty years by the Pascals, Bossuets, and Bourdaloues to its early dignity; attacked on all points, simultaneously or successively, by the libertines, by the philosophers of the eighteenth century, and by the encyclopædists, Christianity lost the battle. There will surely be no cause for wonder—if the single combat of Molière against the Pascals, Bossuets, and Bourdaloues is not its least interesting episode—that we have been anxious to throw light on it, and that we have dwelt on it at length.

I would not dare to say, and it matters little, whether Molière foresaw all the consequences which were yet to arise from his doctrines. Neither Voltaire nor Diderot foresaw, or even wished, all that has been done since their time under the authority of their name. In the ardour of the fight, enveloped and blinded as it were by the smoke of the battle-field, we can hardly measure our blows, much less judge of their effects. Perhaps, however, it is the peculiarity of genius to insinuate something more into its work than is imagined. Talent, which knows everything it does, and can account for it, can do so only from being incapable

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

of stretching its view beyond the horizon of its time and the actual bounds of its experience. But genius is really the power of anticipating the future; and, from age to age, its creations do not change on that account, as is sometimes said, in nature or in meaning, but they must be compared with those laws whose fruitful formulæ include even unforeseen phenomena. Nobody will dispute me the right of inscribing Molière in the rank and number of men of genius.

In any case, whether or not he was conscious of the entire bearing of his work, what cannot be doubted is that, son of Montaigne and Rabelais, friend of Chapelle and La Fontaine, lover of Madeleine Bèjart and husband of Armande, nobody was freer in thought than Molière, more untied in every belief, more indifferent in matters of religion—or, from that very reason, more aggressive, at a time when religion left nobody the liberty of indifference. This might well have been granted him, since, as I have endeavoured to show above, he would probably have continued to attack everything in religion which tends to fetter the development or expansion of the natural and of nature.

His work thus enters into history, and takes its rightful place in the history of ideas. The general aspect of the seventeenth century is perceptibly modified. The false unity which is ascribed to it is merely apparent and superficial. Epochs are

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

to be distinguished in it, and parties in each of these epochs. The Cartesians are one and the Jansenists another. But the libertines are a third, and Molière is their most illustrious representative. What would be whispered, so to speak, only within closed doors, amongst accomplices, and in the coteries of wits, he said publicly, with open doors. What was only a secret or reserved doctrine, of which the common people were not yet considered capable, he taught on the stage and instilled into the agents, the soldiers, and the lackeys who filled the pit. So what was only a theory, to which one did not always dare to conform his conduct, he made a doctrine of morality: a doctrine of morality, that is to say a practice, a rule for life.

And the battle was warm, the fray was confused, with now a loss, and now a gain. The Jansenists seemed to triumph at one time, and the Cartesians, at one time, seemed to unite with the Jansenists. The same Baillet who saw so clearly in Molière "one of the most dangerous enemies of the Church" is the biographer of Descartes. But it was Molière who won; his *Tartufe* changed the future of the battle; and neither piety, nor eloquence, nor even genius has been able to re-establish a reputation or prosperity. In this respect he may be said to herald the doctrine of the eighteenth century, or even to prepare it. He broke to some extent the restraints on free-thought. And



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

as we pass from Rabelais and Montaigne to him without a hitch, so we pass quite smoothly from him to Voltaire and Diderot. He belongs to the family; and, not to trouble with a comparison, it is undoubtedly he who did the most of all, were it only by the superiority of the dramatic form for spreading the ideas of which it makes itself the interpreter.

Shall I say that he is the greater for it? No, since it has been kindly pointed out to me that it is in nobody's power to 'lessen' or 'magnify' Molière—which means nothing, let me say, unless the negation of all criticism. But I do not think it can be a matter of indifference to his glory, to have been, instead of a simple entertainer or a clever merry-andrew, a thinker. The *École des Femmes*, or *Tartufe*, or the *Malade imaginaire* are not works which can be emptied of their contents, to be considered only in their form: we cannot neglect their substance and attend only to their style. This is too often forgotten, and I do not wish to give the reasons now—I shall give them only if I am forced to—but all the same this is too often forgotten. This is what I have endeavoured to show. If, in addition, I have been able to point out, by a notable example, how disastrous for every writer is this verbal criticism, which attends only to the manner in which a thing is said, and never to the thing itself, I should not think that I had lost either my time or trouble; and I hope the reader will agree with me.

## VOLTAIRE AND JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU \*

IT seems an advisable and even a humane act to begin by relieving M. Gaston Maugras of a certain uneasiness: "Although researches, crowned with success," says he in his preface, "and the extreme kindness of the collectors to whom we have applied, have put us in a position to give a considerable amount of unpublished material, the documents which appear in this volume are for the most part extracted from the letters and works which have appeared from the last century to the present day"; and he fears the reproach of having added little to the three thousand odd letters which we should have of Rousseau, if there was a good edition of his correspondence, and to the ten thousand which we do have of Voltaire. Apparently M. Maugras thinks that everybody has read, not only all the letters, but also all the works of Voltaire and Rousseau; not only all their works, but also all those of their contemporaries; and has not only read them, but has them all in vivid recollection. Let him be undeceived and reassured. In our time the real unpublished

\* *Querelles de philosophes: Voltaire et J.-J. Rousseau*, par M. Gaston Maugras. Paris, 1886; Calmann Lévy.

## ESSAYS IN FRENCH LITERATURE

document, according to the famous saying, which is even more true than witty, is precisely what is printed. Only those then will find fault with M. Gaston Maugras for not having given a more "considerable amount of unpublished material" who are themselves ignorant of the bibliography of the subject he has treated. Others know that the difficulty in dealing with Voltaire and Rousseau is not to give or find unpublished material, but not to go astray or lose oneself altogether among the printed material, for even M. Gaston Maugras himself neither knows nor discusses it all. And this is why the best service that can be done us, and the most urgent, is to put a little order into these printed works, to read them for the instruction of those who have not the time to read them themselves, to assort and judge and criticise them, and to use them for the composition of the work of which they are only the material. The use and end of rubble is not to block up the public way, but to serve sooner or later for building houses, if not monuments.

The reader would be surprised were I here to draw up a list of the works we have on the history of the life and writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The Genevans in particular—for Rousseau to them is not merely what he is to us, but something more, a compatriot, the great man, their most illustrious author—never tire of editing his work, and of clearing and preparing the way for the historian of his life. The people of Neuchâtel, who are the

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

trustees of his papers, are no less arduous in the same task. And in France, during his lifetime and even after his death, Rousseau played too great a part, attracted too much of the attention of the public, and exercised too great an influence in every way for us not to be passionately curious of all that concerns him. No doubt we are as curious, and for the same reasons, of all that concerns Voltaire, nor is there a lack of works on the history of his life and writings; but, if I may not say that they are less numerous, still they are not so scattered, and, though not *final*, of a character not so provisional. Further, there is an excellent edition and good biographies of Voltaire, but there are none yet of Rousseau. The best edition we have is of no value—the edition of Musset-Pathay; and, as for biographies, neither the two volumes of Saint-Marc Girardin (1853), nor the heavy compilation of M. Brokerhoff (1863), nor the brilliant sketch of Mr. John Morley (1873) is all that is to be desired. Who can say that it is not the very abundance of materials which discourages the historian from working them up? But who can fail to see, consequently, that, the more they accumulate, the greater the need of haste, even at the expense of being obscure or incomplete in certain points, to turn them to account as far as possible? Granted that the time is not yet come to build, must we not always before building make our plans, and why not begin?

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Let us congratulate M. Maugras on having had this courage, for in his volume on *Voltaire et Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, though he does not altogether fulfil the promise of the title, he has really given us a sketch of a history of Rousseau's life, or, to be quite exact, of the second half of his life—from 1755 to 1778. So I shall not examine if, as I have just been urging, and as would need to be insisted upon in other circumstances, any brochures or newspaper or review articles have escaped the attention of M. Maugras, if, in the long voyage in search of the unpublished, he has been diligent enough in his investigation of the printed matter, if he should not sometimes have followed more closely and discussed more carefully the sayings of his predecessors: it is sufficient for my purpose that he has written his book, and that the book is interesting. But, in case he should return to his sketch to correct and complete it, and thus give us the book we wish, I shall content myself at present with pointing out its two great faults as it now stands—it is not sufficiently impartial, and the composition lacks breadth of treatment.

With the exception of Buffon and Montesquieu, our great men of the eighteenth century were rather unamiable characters, such as d'Alembert, Grimm, Diderot; and above them all, undoubtedly the two greatest, stood Voltaire and Jean - Jacques, two "puissant gods," two shabby fellows. When I think of the one I always prefer the other. Voltaire was

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

more perverse, Jean-Jacques was more suspicious ; the former was more irritable, the latter more dangerous ; scurrility was at the bottom of the character of the one, and even was one part of his genius, the other was never better inspired than by defiance, envy, or hatred : and though nobody could safely be the enemy of Voltaire, that was almost better than being the friend of Rousseau. And so, if I must compare them, I cannot incline more to the one than the other, and much less can I join with M. Maugras in placing all right and moderation and generosity on the side of Voltaire, and all the faults on the side of Rousseau. M. Maugras is too forgetful that on every occasion, and without any provocation, only because the success of their works made them rivals of his glory and popularity, Voltaire attacked, one after the other, the least and the greatest of his contemporaries : Piron and Fréron, Crébillon and Maupertuis, Buffon and Montesquieu. “He seems to have laid the scheme of burying all his contemporaries during his lifetime,” said Buffon ; “he has a grudge against every pedestal,” said also Diderot ; and I would willingly add that, aristocrat in everything, he was truly democratic only in his jealousy of all that was above him. After the success of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* and the notoriety of *Émile*, in vain had Rousseau been the friend of Voltaire, and Voltaire, under the pseudonym of M. de la Roupillière or

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Le R. P. l'Escarbotier, would have jeered at it no less cruelly.

So partial is M. Maugras to Voltaire, that not only does he overlook all this, but even goes to the other extreme of holding that Voltaire had the right to see a direct and personal attack in Rousseau's famous *Discourses*, as in his *Lettre sur les Spectacles*. For, he argues, had not Voltaire been for the last thirty years the support of those theatres which Rousseau attacked, just as he was "the most surprising incarnation of the civilisation, the arts, and the sciences" in which Rousseau could see only the ever renewed nourishment of human corruption? M. Maugras is surely unwilling to grant the right of having other ideas on the theatre than those held by the author of *Zaire*. And because Voltaire wished to establish a theatre at Geneva, no Genevan had the right to think it bad! It is the same, too, when M. Maugras deals with Rousseau's well-known letter which contains his challenge to Voltaire: "I do not like you at all, sir; you have done me the most painful injuries possible, me your disciple and enthusiast"; and when he finds it, as indeed it is, I may say impertinent, the most impertinent, to use Voltaire's word, which fanatic ever scrawled. But M. Maugras forgets that if Rousseau, throughout this long quarrel, was impertinent in his letters and fanatical in his proceedings, he at least knew, in his public writings, how to keep from descending

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

to the low insults which Voltaire heaped upon him, and which this irritable patriarch did not cease to spew upon him even to the last. When M. Maugras retouches his book, he will be able to keep his sympathies for Voltaire, and even let them be plainly evident; but he will do well merely to ground them better, if I may say so, and to strengthen his own case by being more just to Rousseau, though still preferring Voltaire.

I should also have liked if M. Maugras, without any essential change in the plan of the book, had not put out of court, as he says, the talent and the genius of Voltaire and Rousseau, so as to study only their character. Speaking generally, I really do not understand how anyone can distinguish, separate, and in fact dissociate what nature has meant to be so closely united—the talent, the genius, and the character of a great writer. But when we are concerned with a man who, like Voltaire, paints himself so true to life, unintentionally and unwittingly, in ten lines, or of a man who, like Rousseau, passed the one half of his life only in telling us about the other, I admit I cannot understand it at all. This is the gravest fault in M. Maugras's book. His study of the mere character of Voltaire and Rousseau tempted me while I read it to repeat the saying which is attributed to M. de Castries, at the very time of the great quarrel of Rousseau and Diderot. "This



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

is absurd," he said; "why, these people are the only thing spoken about, people of no position, who have no house, and are lodged in a garret: we can't put up with this." And indeed, if Voltaire and Rousseau were not known otherwise, we neither do nor may see any reasons why we should interest ourselves in their quarrel, nor for M. Maugras himself to take such a great interest in it. Who are these people? What have they to do with us? What does it matter whether they agree or pitch into each other? And since it is evident that they did quarrel, what business of ours is it to examine so carefully who was the first to begin? M. Maugras assuredly knows why. He could tell us. Perhaps he thinks he has reasons for not telling us. But all the same he has not done so. And I am sorry for it, for had he tried to tell us, he would have seen that there was something more than the meeting or collision of two adverse vanities.

Not that in my turn I wish to abstract Voltaire and Rousseau, of all people, from their human characteristics, to make them pure spirits that can be separated only by their way of understanding liberty, progress, and justice. God forbid! this would be erring in the other extreme. Many paltry reasons helped on their quarrel, these vulgar and lamentable reasons which could as well provoke two door-porters. For example, if Rousseau was not exactly jealous of Voltaire's fortune, his estates and his income, he cer-

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

tainly was jealous of the show and security of his social position, and if not of his money, at least of the consideration Voltaire owed to his money. And what Voltaire, on his part, could not put up with, was to be compared, he, the gentleman in ordinary of the chamber, the table-companion of kings, the friend of the mistresses and empresses, with this little Genevan, this "clockmaker's boy," as he calls him, without money, position, and society. We know the tone in which he reproached the other Rousseau, Jean-Baptiste, with being the son of a bootmaker.

Adroitly and maliciously M. Maugras shows up these paltry reasons. Thus, on the side of Jean-Jacques, one of these was the installation of Voltaire at the gates of Geneva. This intriguer had taken his place from him. In this town, to which the "citizen" counted on returning in triumph, a *master of witticisms* irrecoverably filched from him all hopes of popularity. "You have alienated my fellow-citizens from me," he wrote, "you will make me die in a foreign land, while all the honours that a man can expect will accompany you into my country." There is the arrow, and there the wound! Reciprocally, on the side of Voltaire is the influence which Rousseau continues to exercise on the preachers of Protestantism. He is worried in his pleasures: he is not allowed to recruit actors for his theatre among the youth of Geneva: "The priests of Geneva are joined in horrible faction against comedy. I shall have

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

the first socinian priest who passes on my territory shot. Jean-Jacques is a 'jean f. . .' who writes every fortnight to these priests to enflame them against plays." His letters to d'Argental, d'Alembert, and Damiaville are full of this sort of complaint. But these are not the only reasons, either on one side or the other, and certainly not the truest ones, as M. Maugras seems to think. And if Rousseau's persuasion that the burning of *Émile* at Geneva was due only to Voltaire, and Voltaire's indignation on hearing of the underhand methods of which Rousseau accused him, are stronger reasons, I should like still stronger and deeper reasons, and these there are.

When there appeared, one after the other, in less than ten years, from 1755 to 1764, the *Discours sur l'Inégalité*, the *Lettre à d'Alembert*, the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, the *Contrat social*, *Émile*, the *Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont*, the *Lettres de la Montagne*, it was impossible for Voltaire, in the first place, not to see that this newcomer was robbing him of a portion of the empire of opinion. And if for that matter he could have made any mistake about it, circumstances would not have been long in opening his eyes. We must, indeed, remember that, before *Émile* and the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, there had not been a case for a very long time of a success so sudden, universal, and contagious as that of Rousseau. Other works, like his, had been raised above the clouds, according to the expression of the time, but none yet had gone so far

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

or sunk so deep ; neither the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, nor the *Esprit des Lois*, nor the *Lettres philosophiques*, nor the *Lettres persanes*. Even at the theatre this fever of enthusiasm and delirium of admiration was hardly known. It seemed as if the eloquence of this orator had struck at the bottom of their hearts a chord which nobody before had ever been able to touch, while among the crowd it awoke passions which were still unknown. The very nature of their success, and this has not been sufficiently dwelt upon, was not the least new thing in *Émile* and the *Nouvelle Héloïse*. In vain did Voltaire, in his letter to the Marquis de Ximenès, endeavour to turn the novel to ridicule, its Saint-Preux and Julie d'Étange, Wolmar and Lord Bomston. In vain, though from a determination not to be surpassed, as Condorcet tells us, did he oppose his *Sermon des Cinquante* to the *Profession de foi du Vicaire savoyard*. It came to nothing ; he lost all the trouble of his witticisms and impiety. Popular opinion was escaping him, and just at the very moment when he thought he was master of it, when the encyclopædists in body affected to follow at his heels, when he had just seen the death of Fontenelle and Montesquieu : and he had passed his sixty-fifth year ! I have sometimes asked myself what would have become of Voltaire's kingship, had it not been for a Calas and a Sirven ; and I cannot think he was so simple, when he saw the success of Rousseau, as not to have asked the same question himself.

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

The causes of this success have been sought for everywhere more or less, and literary causes have usually been urged—the novelty of Rousseau's language, the character of his eloquence, sensibility, passion, and nature all making their way at last through or over the débris of old convention. All the forms of literature were exhausted: tragedy, comedy, eloquence, and even history languished in the imitation of the classic models; the novel of Prévost and the drama of Diderot had just appeared; lyric poetry was not yet in existence; the century was growing weary, in spite of the *Encyclopædia*, with the epigrams of Piron, the little verses of Bernis, and the nasty wit of the younger Crébillon. Rousseau came and changed all. Free from the prejudices which weighed on the majority of men of letters, he dared to be himself; and, as he was Rousseau, this meant a revolution. Now this revolution began by overturning all that Voltaire had, for almost half a century, believed, said, and taught; if it should chance to succeed, it would convince him of the error of his criticism and the sterility even of its aim. Conservative in everything, as has been so well said, except in religion, not only had Voltaire submitted with docility to the fetters of tradition, but he had glorified them, and, in a certain sense, he had written his *Siècle de Louis XIV* only to raise the respect for them to the height of a dogma. According to him the only forms which should be

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

cultivated were those practised by the seventeenth century, and since neither Corneille nor Molière had written novels, but only people like Courtilz de Sandras and the Comtesse d'Aulnoy, the novel was fit only for the amusement of children and women. "If some novels still appear, true men of letters despise them." He was of opinion that certain subjects were unworthy of being treated by art, and as Racine had never put on the stage the love of a tutor for his pupil, the *Nouvelle Héloïse* for that one reason could be only a rhapsody. And believing further that there were rules, or rather fixed formulæ, for the art of writing, at once invariable and rigid, he held that whoever did not write according to the rigour of these rules wrote badly, in a style less French than Swiss, or rather Iroquois. "Elegance of style is so necessary that without it the beauty of the sentiments is lost."

Such being his ideas, Voltaire could no more approve the form than the substance of those of Rousseau, nor his novels, nor his *Discourses*, and still less could he like them: and if these two men were in accord in every other point, would their views on the art of writing alone have been sufficient to divide them? The elder Corneille in the preceding century was no more astonished or scandalised at the success of the tragedies of Racine, than was Voltaire at the success of the writings of the citizen of Geneva. It really seemed to the author of *Zaire* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV* that a barbarian was entering as a

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

conquerer into the domain which it had taken him fifty years to win, was disputing the territory over which Fréron and even Desfontaines had recently recognised his empire, and was devastating the heritage he believed he had received directly from the men of the great century. And it must to his honour be said, that, if the success of Rousseau had perhaps wounded him at first in his vanity of fashionable author, what he defended, what he wished to defend, what he thought he did defend, against the author of *Émile* and the *Héloïse*, was the cause of letters and taste, of science and art, the cause of culture and good-breeding—the cause of progress even and civilisation.

I have purposely endeavoured to enlarge on this, for indeed there were other matters of dispute between Voltaire and Rousseau than *belles-lettres* and good taste. In 1760 the century had not yet shown its bias, and the question was to know which of the two would determine it—the citizen of Geneva or the lord of Tournay. How can it have happened that M. Maugras, and so many others, have failed to note this simple point? Though statistics and chronology are often useless, they are not so always. In the edition of Beuchot, the *Mélanges* of Voltaire, which contain all his stray tracts, fill no less than fourteen volumes, of which only four are made up of pieces anterior to 1760. Add to these the seven volumes of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*, of which the first

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

edition appeared only in 1764, and we have seventeen volumes, or a little more, which contain the polemical work of the patriarch almost in its entirety. Voltaire was not a "philosopher" to begin with, but for a very long time a wit, and nothing but a wit. For Montesquieu, for example, who died in 1755, he was still only that. It was in the last twenty years of his long life that he became the man of his century, the apostle of tolerance and the trumpet of incredulity. And if we remember in this connection Condorcet's note to the *Sermon des Cinquante*, which tells us that Voltaire, "a little jealous of the courage of Rousseau," composed this work only in reply to the *Profession de foi du Vicaire savoyard*, we can conclude from all these circumstances that Rousseau, without knowing it, was the instrument, or even the worker of the last transformation of Voltaire. In the measure that Rousseau developed his principles, Voltaire opposed to them his—so different and so contradictory, that to reconcile these two doctrines and these two men, as has sometimes been attempted, in a common apotheosis, needs nothing less, in fact, than a ridiculous ignorance on our part of their doctrines and of themselves, of their works and of their life, of the eighteenth century and of ourselves. This is what is now called liberalism, width and breadth of mind: I call it indifference, when it is not stupidity. When we have mated the grand Turk to the republic of Venice, we shall then be able to reconcile Voltaire and Rousseau.



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Never, indeed, was there a clearer opposition or a more formal contradiction. Remove the priesthood and establish liberty of speech, but let there be, none the less, for the rabble, who otherwise would be too prone to dishonesty, a "rewarding and revengeful" God: this is all the social philosophy of Voltaire, and his ideal is never higher. Of a nature indifferent, or rather a stranger to the notion of moral good or evil, he held that honesty consists only in the observation of social usages, just as virtue even consists only in obedience to certain universal and necessary "prejudices." Or farther, to make the largest allowance possible for what is just and salutary in his conception, the social plan is such a fine thing in his eyes, that man cannot have other obligation or law than to work to maintain and perfect it. Everything is praiseworthy which tends to this end, nothing is dangerous but that which deviates from it. And if it is true, as certain philosophers, and Helvétius among others, have held, that public prosperity sometimes results from the concourse of the vices of individuals, we must change the name and call these vices virtues.

Rousseau is not so easily satisfied. Uncertain and wavering, his doctrine of morality is of his time; but he has a doctrine of morality, and it is a morality, a rule we may say, which is founded on a certain idea of a justice anterior, exterior, and superior to the social plan. Even when he perverts its principles, when, with his unfortunate sophistry, instead of submitting his passions

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

to the rule, he endeavours to bend the rule to his passions, Rousseau does not for all that cease to be moral, since he is ever trying to realise the agreement of his conduct with his principles. And, before admiring the social plan in the refinements of civilisation and luxury, he asks himself what has it done, what is it doing, to establish among men the reign of justice and right. This is the true sign of an eminently moral nature.

Though he deceived himself in the search of this very rule, though in founding it on sentiment he betrayed it to the mercy of individual caprice, though he committed a dangerous error in endeavouring to lead man back to nature as the source of all justice, and though, in attacking immoderately the civilisation of his time, he, in his turn, despised the grandeur of its accomplished work,—all this may be true, all this is true, yet this does not concern us here, for the question is not the value but only the nature of the ideal of Rousseau. I ask if there is another more radically different from that of Voltaire? As much as Voltaire's is tightly bound to the maintenance of civilisation, so much is Rousseau's bound to the overthrow of this very civilisation. According to Voltaire, man becomes more and more perfect in proportion as he gets further away from the state of nature; according to Rousseau, on the other hand, as he comes nearer it. The same epochs which for the one mark the progress of humanity are for the

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

other epochs of the aggravation of injustice and inequality. So let us be surprised that Voltaire and Rousseau did not agree, and agreed even less the better they were capable of understanding each other.

These observations may help to solve a question which has been too often discussed. If we are to believe that hypocritical old fellow Marmontel, when the Academy of Dijon in 1749 propounded the well-known subject—"Have the arts and sciences contributed to purify morals?" Rousseau was going to treat it in the affirmative, had not Diderot observed that it was the *pons asinorum*, to which all the mediocre talents were taking the road. Rousseau has given another account of it in his *Confessions*, and does himself honour in his choice. However, M. Maugras, without adducing any other reason, decides in a few words that "the version which Marmontel had from Diderot himself seems liker the truth." Shall I tell him that the version of Diderot is not in the *Memoirs* of Marmontel, but really in the *Essai sur les Règnes de Claude et de Néron*, by Denis Diderot himself, that it differs greatly from what we are here given, and, though not identical in all points with that of Rousseau, can yet be more easily reconciled with the *Confessions* than with the version of Marmontel's *Memoirs*? But I shall rather tell him that Jean-Jacques, being what he was, would not have thought merely of treating the question, if he ought to have treated it otherwise than he did, and that, as I have already hinted at the

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

reason, we shall see it much more clearly immediately. I fear M. Maugras has not always understood Rousseau very well.

It is the same when he asks why "the man who passed his life in complaining of his lot, in condemning and criticising everything," should have thought fit to uphold against Voltaire the cause of Providence, which had, indeed, been tolerably abused in his poem *Le Désastre de Lisbonne*. The reply, however, is simple enough, and "the man" has given it himself. For Rousseau criticises and condemns only the evils, or the causes of the evils, which civilisation has introduced into the works of Providence, and has need of the existence of Providence as a guarantee for the hope he entertains of seeing the disappearance some day of these evils and their causes. His reasoning is that of theologians who hold that sin does not consist in the use of things which are by nature bad, *since God did not make such things*, but in the bad use of good things. Similarly, according to Rousseau, we lack no reasons for complaint, and if we did, he would undertake to furnish us with them; but it is in us that arise so many evils, and not in nature, and still less in Providence—in us and the inner vice of the social organisation. Only change the conditions of the compact, give up man to himself, re-establish nature in the purity of her primitive institution, and all will be well, since all was well on leaving the hands of its author, and has degenerated only in the

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

hands of men. M. Maugras has not seen that by depriving Rousseau's system of the dogma of Providence, he deprived it of its keystone, and left not a stone standing of the fragile, it may be, but grandiose edifice.

To all these reasons, literary and moral, of the opposition and division of the author of *Émile* and that of *Candide*, it is now time to add this last one : Voltaire is an aristocrat if ever there was one, but with Rousseau the plebeian enters for the first time into the history of literature. That the citizen of Geneva was born of a bourgeois family is of no importance : the adventures of his unfortunate youth soon lost him his social standing. The fact is that Rousseau knew what misfortune was, since he notes in his *Confessions* the day when he ceased to feel hunger, and since, moreover, it has been possible to hold that the distress of his last years led him to suicide. I do not mention this to excuse him ; but this cannot be forgotten when it is maintained that the passage of the same *Lettre sur la Providence*, where he compares his poverty with the ostentatious abundance of Voltaire, is only a figure of rhetoric. And just as he knew misfortune, he knew the unfortunate. Voltaire never knew what passes in the soul of a peasant, of a man of the people, of a lackey, of the daughter of an inn, nor the angers and hatreds they ruminate in silence, nor their stifled grumblings against a social order, of which their shoulders, if not their understandings, would still

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

feel that they alone were carrying the whole weight. Rousseau knew it, and knew it by experience, and did not speak of it—he would rather have hidden it if he could—but all these grudges passed into and swelled the torrent of his eloquence. And no more did Voltaire speak of it, but he felt it, and felt, too, that there was something else underneath it all than mere rhetoric, and that it was a declaration of war.

This is the true secret of his animosity, as it is also the meaning of the power of Rousseau. In the old society, till the time of Rousseau, however low a man's origin, he took his place on becoming a man of letters; he passed from his condition into another; far from being proud of his origin, he sought to efface all traces of it; with his new condition he assumed new sentiments. Rousseau was the first to remain a man of the people on becoming author, and to found his popularity on the disdain he insolently avowed of everything he was not himself. For his pride even, whose nature has been so often misunderstood, is not the pride of a man of letters or a wit, but it is rather the pride of a plebeian, the pride of a self-made man who wishes to remember his beginnings but will on no account be reminded of them. Has this characteristic of Rousseau been brought into sufficient prominence? Has he not been studied too exclusively—for with men of letters we usually dwell at length on their origin, family, and education—for this to be

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

taken into account. These are questions which I do not intend to examine now, and I shall be satisfied if what I have endeavoured to show is evident, that, if the great lords and fine ladies, the Prince de Conti or the Maréchale de Luxembourg, did not recognise what this plebeian brought them in his books, the more aristocratic and intelligent Voltaire saw it clearly. A new type of man was appearing on the scene, and his first exercise of power was to be to overthrow, as soon as he could, all that Voltaire had loved.

Are we to hold with Rousseau that Voltaire persecuted him, made plans against him, denounced him to the rigours of the government of Geneva? On this subject may be read some of M. Maugras's best chapters. But Genevans will pardon me, I hope, if I dispense with recounting their intestine quarrels in the eighteenth century, though that would be necessary for a thorough study of the question. I admit then that Voltaire, throughout the whole affair, pursued Rousseau only with sarcasm and calumny; and my great reason for this is that he was not in a position to damage him otherwise than by words. For as to his protestations of innocence, we know what they were; and M. Maugras in general seems to put too much faith in them. Nobody in the world ever lied like Voltaire. When he published against Rousseau that *Lettre au Docteur Pansophe* which Beuchot did not think he needed to insert in his edition of Voltaire's works, but which is none the less by the patriarch,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

not content with disowning it, did he not himself attribute it, first to the Abbé Coyer, and then to Bordes (of Lyons), both of whom were living, and both of whom were thus exposed to the reprisals of Rousseau's *Confessions*? These were his smallest tricks. To the pleasure of injuring people he added that of misleading their suspicions—"with his usual candour." But, whatever may be the real state of affairs, since neither he nor Rousseau was burned or hanged, let us admit that Rousseau is wrong when "he poses as the victim of Voltaire's intrigues," and let us acknowledge that M. Maugras has proved "the innocence of the patriarch."

It does not follow all the same that Rousseau was not the victim of any persecution, and we need not, like M. Maugras, find in the story of the *Confessions* only the ravings of a sick man. No more am I very sure of the veracity of the *Confessions*. I believe he often lied, and, if need be, I would nerve myself to show the falsehood or error of more than one point which his enthusiasts have accepted as certain. But I desire justice. Rousseau's testimony is not received in his own cause, and when, as was said, it makes for him; why is it received when it makes against him?

What would we now know of the youth of Rousseau, of some of the saddest adventures of his life, if he himself; in his *Confessions*, had not thought it his duty to tell us them. Yet all these adventures form part of his history, and, far from contesting them,



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

nobody ever thinks of discussing them. But what then means this strange obstinacy of finding him at fault on Voltaire, Diderot, Grimm, and Madame d'Épinay? Were the *Memoirs* of Madame d'Épinay, for example, the declamations of Diderot in his *Essai sur les Règnes de Claude et de Néron*, and so many other writings, not just composed in answer to the *Confessions*, and why are they, *à priori*, of superior credit than the *Confessions* themselves? The *Confessions* are believed, and we would be loth not to believe them, when they admit Rousseau's fault or crime, but they are not believed when they contain his excuse or justification; they are the cry of the sinner against himself when he accuses himself, but they are the work of his madness and the monument of his folly when he dares to attack a Grimm or Diderot. But are these people gods to us, who must not be touched? It is surely enough that they are so for their editors. I place them all in the same rank, and, if I must choose between them, I shall still prefer Rousseau.

As to the matter of the persecution, it is merely a question of understanding, and, for understanding, merely a question of distinguishing. Assuredly, no more than Voltaire, did Diderot, or d'Alembert, or Grimm, and still less M. de Malesherbes, or Madame de Luxembourg "conspire" against Rousseau. In the case of *Émile*, notably, Madame de Luxembourg and M. de Malesherbes proved themselves good, obliging, and devoted to Rousseau, though he repaid

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

them, I admit, only with marked ingratitude. But, as for the encyclopædists, it is impossible to deny their constant hostility to him. The reasons are well known. They did not dare to sign their works, and this man wrote on the frontispiece of his, "every honest man should avow the books he publishes." They formed a coterie, and this man, who stood apart, alone disputed the public attention they meant to monopolise. To be convinced of the reality of the injury and of its importance, read, in the *Memoirs* of Marmontel, a page that is more than malevolent on . . . Buffon, who did not frequent, any more than Rousseau, the company of the Baron d'Holbach or Madame Geoffrin. Again, in their charges against the philosophers, even the bishops distinguished and separated Rousseau from the rest of the troop. "The famous Jean-Jacques Rousseau," said one of them, "merits special exception among the modern enemies of Christianity. He knows better than anybody the so-called philosophers of our days, and it is undoubtedly because he knows them too well that he will not have in common with them either the name they affect or the principles they enunciate." Could they tolerate this language?

So they replied, not openly—for that was not their method—but in an underhand way, by little treacherous insinuations, by attacking the writings, the person, and the character of Rousseau; by painting him as a "monster of pride" to those who did not

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

know him ; by estranging from him those who knew him badly ; by making him ridiculous in the eyes of those who knew him better. And as they were numerous, as they filled the salons of Paris, as in the absence of Rousseau himself, of Buffon, and of Voltaire, they had the airs of great men and the assurance of oracles, as they were in short the true dispensers of esteem and literary reputation, so they created among the men of letters and the ladies a prejudice unfavourable and soon injurious to Rousseau. The encyclopædists persecuted Rousseau as they did so many others, with the same proceedings, after the same manner, and in the same measure that they persecuted Fréron, for example, and all those generally who were not of their clique.

When to this is now added the condemnation of *Émile*, a warrant issued for the arrest of Rousseau by the Parliament of Paris, the soil of Geneva interdicted to the author of the *Profession de foi du Vicaire savoyard*, the magistrates of Berne giving him twenty-four hours to leave their territory, the clergymen of Neuchâtel exciting the population of Motiers-Travers against him—then we shall understand that if this is not persecution, it is at least the semblance of it, and quite a good semblance, and that a man such as Rousseau could easily be mistaken about it. But when a little later the police forbade him, out of deference to Madame d'Épinay, to read his *Confessions* in the salons of Paris, that is to say, according to

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

himself, to offer his apology against his calumniators, or again when Voltaire waxed loudly indignant that the presence of this "clock-maker's boy" should be tolerated at Paris,—who was still under warrant for arrest,—what in all the world was Rousseau to think of Voltaire and Madame d'Épinay?

All the same, I do not deny that Rousseau singularly exaggerated, magnified, disfigured the facts. In the solitude, for which, whatever be said, nobody was less suited, no matter what unjust or absurd suspicion offers itself to his heated spirit, no matter what phantom presents itself, Rousseau begins by believing it, then welcomes it, puts all his trust in it, does nothing to dispel it, and seeks rather to give it the body and reality it lacks. His ingenuity in this matter is terrible against himself. And, with that characteristic pride in his own understanding, he prefers to doubt his friends and protectors rather than the infallibility of his imagination. This is what M. Eugène Ritter had already shown so well in his *Nouvelles Recherches sur les Confessions et la Correspondance de Rousseau*, and M. Maugras has endeavoured to make it still more evident. Fortunate he is in this at least, that he does not return once again to Madame d'Épinay, of whom Rousseau undoubtedly said much ill in his *Confessions*, but who has had good revenge in mixing herself up as she has done in the history of Rousseau!

A good example of Rousseau's unfortunate hasty-

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

ness of suspicion will be found in the long account M. Maugras gives of *Émile*. Why did Rousseau, all of a sudden, during the leisurely printing of his book, take it into his head that the Jesuits had seized his work, that they were going to delay its publication, and, counting on his near demise, were proposing to corrupt its text and opinions? As if the Jesuits at this time had not other matters to think of than persecuting Rousseau! But he takes it into his head because he takes it into his head, he believes it because he believes it; unless it be, as M. Maugras says, that his madness was now beginning to affect his brain. The same observation is to be made on his great quarrel with David Hume. M. Maugras gives a curious and instructive account of it, to which I shall be content to add a few words. Three years after the quarrel, Rousseau suddenly discovers an act of treachery on the part of Hume which he had not till then suspected. "They have removed my portraits which are like me," he says, "to replace them by one which gives me a wild look and the face of a Cyclops." And here is the abomination of desolation: "This pleasing portrait was accompanied by one of David Hume, who really has the head of a Cyclops, but whom they have given a charming air." Certainly he had reason to suspect that when Hume commissioned this portrait at London, it was not "from friendly motives"; but all

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

the same he could not then have divined the purpose of this Cyclops. But he knows it now: by the odious character of his face they wished his spirit to be judged, and they succeeded.

This is another instance of Rousseau's madness, as M. Maugras says rightly: but, instead of seeking a purely physiological cause for his malady, should he not rather have found the true cause in the pangs of remorse, of which the *Confessions* may pass as authentic testimony; in these misfortunes, assuredly commonplace, whose effect upon an organisation so peculiar as that of Rousseau he has but failed to recognise; and finally even in those very persecutions which he had just denied? This may well seem a paradox; but, notwithstanding his *Confessions*, and in spite of his aggressive airs, Rousseau really wanted nothing so much as that capacity of resistance, and that power of reaction, which precisely establish, in the history of their long quarrel, and in the history of the eighteenth century, the superiority of Voltaire. Nothing, not even his very persecutions, failed to irritate, and excite, and exalt Voltaire, and, on the other hand, nothing, not even his brief elations, failed to stupefy, and cast down, and depress Rousseau.

I am not surprised that Rousseau's madness has been so reluctantly believed, and that so few critics or historians, though they use the word, have accepted the fact. When Voltaire called Rousseau a "madman,"

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

and a "wretched madman," it was rather to insult than commiserate him ; but as for us, who have better knowledge of the *Confessions* and the *Réveries d'un promeneur solitaire*, we ask ourselves, if this is the work of madness, what is the work of sanity, talent, or even genius? Who can be master of his thought if this man was not when he wrote so many immortal pages? These arguments belong to a time when it was believed that madness, to merit its name, had to attack the whole understanding. Now that we know that it is otherwise, that the attack of madness is never so sudden and rarely so complete, that it is even a common thing for a madman to rave only on the object of his delirium, we can admit the coexistence of genius and madness in the mind of Rousseau, just as we admit it in the mind of Swift or Tasso. The constitutional malady from which he had suffered so long, and with whose crises had coincided most of his accesses of defiance or misanthropy, had not disappeared, though time seemed to have allayed it or wrought its cure: it had only changed.

"More than four years before his death," says his friend Corancez, "I had frequent opportunities of observing it. The access announced itself by a change on his face, and a very marked movement in one of his arms. . . . When I visited him and saw these signs, I made up my mind that I was to hear from his mouth all the most extravagant statements it is possible to imagine. . . . These extravagancies were

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

always about the enemies by whom he thought he was surrounded, and the combined and complicated snares in which he thought he was entrapped." If the testimony of Corancez appear perhaps suspicious—for Corancez needs Rousseau's madness to prove his suicide—we have only to open a treatise on mental diseases. There we can see at once that there are barely one or two of the ordinary symptoms of melancholia wanting in the case of Rousseau, and we can also learn that "in a great number of cases melancholia becomes chronic and develops into a habitual delirium which does not otherwise trouble the patient." Though for long denied, from this false or incomplete idea of mental derangement, and denied in spite of evidence—for if it is not in the *Confessions* or the *Rêveries*, it flashes forth in the queer dialogues entitled, *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*—the madness of Rousseau cannot be doubted now. He was, or became mad, not in the vague and general sense of the term, but in its proper and pathological sense; and his masterpieces are no evidence to the contrary, if indeed his madness does not explain the nature, character, and influence of some of them.

There would surely be no reason for insisting so strongly on the madness of Rousseau, if no consequences are to be drawn from it, in as far as they affect the history of his work or influence rather than of his life. The madness of Rousseau was certainly not the condition, and still less the



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

material, the stuff of his genius ; but, from the single fact of his madness, there has crept into his very masterpieces an unhealthy element, a source of error and corruption ; and as this was the most obvious thing in Rousseau, it has accordingly been the most faithfully and most frequently imitated. There would be an abundance of proofs of this, and I should like to develop them. Such is this sovereign right of passion, which he may not have been the first to proclaim, but which he aggravated, by endeavouring to justify it ; and which, amidst the truth of the life of this world, as may be seen every day, leads those who follow it to crime, madness, or death, and never has led, and never will lead to anything else. There are "splendid" passions only as there are "splendid" diseases or "splendid" crimes, and all passion is by nature bad, since it is nothing practically but the worker of trouble and the counsellor of iniquity.

Such, too, is this exaggeration of the *ego* of which he is the first example, though neither the most famous nor notorious, a monstrous exaggeration, abnormal, always essentially morbid, and the smallest consequence of which, by destroying the sentiment of human solidarity, leads inevitably to the destruction of the very principle of society. All human society rests on self-sacrifice and the surrender of personal desires to the common weal.

And such too, perhaps, would be this feeling for

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

nature, of which Rousseau is honoured as the great discoverer. For if we must love nature, we should not go the length of identifying ourselves with her, and certainly not of conforming to her lessons of indifference and immorality. What if I were now to pass to the political and social ideas of the citizen of Geneva? For a hundred years and more we have not observed that, in following the impulse of Rousseau, we have chosen a sick man as guide. And, to confine our observations only to the history of literature, if there is so much madness mingled with the grandeur of romanticism, it is the "fault of Rousseau," as used to be said, and said truly, but it is above all the fault of his madness. Yes, the very madness of Rousseau, more than everything else perhaps, contributed to his success in his time and to his influence in ours: and his enthusiasts may prefer this madness, if they wish, to the wisdom of the world, but it is at least necessary to know that it is madness.

In the analysis of M. Maugras's book I have endeavoured to complete it, or, to put it more modestly, to indicate in what points it would gain by being completed. Biographical criticism—I repeat it in concluding, for it is the subject of his continual illusion—does not exist by itself, since, whatever may be said, it would not deal with Voltaire or Rousseau if they were not the authors of

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

their works. The men take up too much place in his book, the works too little : there is an abundance of facts, but a scarcity of ideas. Such is the result of having been too often in the company of Madame d'Épinay. This kind woman was somewhat given to scandal, as Voltaire said, and she had the most beautiful black eyes, but little mental ballast. Does not M. Maugras, who has inherited from her his hatred of Rousseau, owe to her also his taste for gossip? Let him bear me no grudge for saying so, since, at the present time, as he knows, it will only make his book more certain of success. Who nowadays would not give the *Essai sur les Mœurs* for a few fragments of Voltaire's letters to Madame du Châtelet, or the *Contrat social* along with the *Nouvelle Héloïse* for the letters of Jean-Jacques to Madame d'Houdetot? And I must myself confess that, if M. Maugras ever finds them, I shall hasten to read them.

## THE CLASSIC AND ROMANTIC \*

### I

WHAT is a classic author and what is a romanticist? Such is the double question raised at once by this title, assuredly well calculated to excite our curiosity — *The Romanticism of Classics*. And the answer can be given in four words, if we care to believe M. Émile Deschanel, four words, and no more, of which his book is the pleasant, clever, and brilliant development — too brilliant, too clever, too pleasant even sometimes. A *romanticist* would be simply a *classic* author in the making; and, reciprocally, a *classic* author would be nothing more than a romanticist who has attained his ideal.

“Those whom we now admire the most,” says M. Deschanel, “and who are in possession of undisputed glory for the future, were first of all, each in his own way, revolutionaries in literature. And those who did not make a revolution in their time have not survived, because they had neither the necessary importance nor force; or they

\* *Le Romantisme des Classiques*, par M. Émile Deschanel. Paris, 1883; Calmann Lévy. [In this essay, as in M. Brunetière's, *classique* is used in the sense of *classic* rather than of *classicist*.—Translator.]

## ESSAYS IN FRENCH LITERATURE

survive only in the second or third rank, in the very measure and proportion of the originality of their talent." Are names necessary in support of this definition? If the author of the *Cid* and *Polyeucte*, for example, is now a classic to us, he began by being a romanticist to his contemporaries. Was not the animosity of authors, in this memorable year 1636, almost universal against the *Cid*? And, a few years later, did not the same admirers who counted the poet among the wits of the Hôtel de Rambouillet, give an icy reception, as was then said, to *Polyeucte*? But, on the other hand, if the author of *Zaïre* and *Alzire*—let me distinguish him from the author of *Zadig* and *Candide*—is no longer a classic for us, it is just because no man was ever less romantic for his contemporaries, I mean to say more careful to humour their literary superstitions, and to win them through their prejudices. Molière and La Fontaine, Pascal and Bossuet, Racine and Boileau, Saint-Simon, Rousseau, Chateaubriand, Victor Hugo, are all classics, are they not, but all more or less romantic? On the contrary, Destouches and Lamotte, Nicole and Bretonneau, Dangeau, Marais, Luynes as well as Barbier, Grimm along with d'Alembert, and Saint-Lambert besides Morellet, Étienne and de Jouy, Scribe and Ponsard are not romantic at all, if history is to be believed, but also not classic. "A man lives down everything only by reason of strength or genius,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

just as by reason of this very strength or this very genius he began by disturbing the ways of thinking of his contemporaries, by scandalising them, by revolting them, by calling forth their criticisms, their railings, and their insults, by making a hole, like a cannon-ball, in their prejudices and their old poetic regime."

And this is why whoever was at first received with the universal applause of his contemporaries, and thus paid for his glory in the money of popularity, dies with the generations whose favour he has exhausted, and has nothing to claim of posterity. Such was the case of Mdlle. de Scudéri, the case of the Abbé Delille, the case too of twenty others. From not having been sufficiently romantic, they have not become classic. The House of Fame, in the pretty saying of Marmontel, is like the kingdom of Heaven: *Regnum coelorum vim patitur, et violenti rapiunt illud*. It is to be got into only by climbing, or by knocking down the walls, or by breaking the fences. To make the attempt merely, is to be already a romanticist; but to bring it to a good issue is to be truly a classic. So that if all the romanticists have not yet become classics, without any desire for it on their part, all the classics at least, without any knowledge of it, began by being romanticists. And the acme of *romanticism*, by a consequence, perhaps unlooked for, but after all apparently quite logical, is *classicism*. "If some

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

people," says M. Deschanel, "did not share all our admiration for the seventeenth century, I should be inclined to think that they were perhaps as ignorant of the best reasons for admiring ours also, to which they wish to confine themselves. . . . It is from the same source and the same causes that our admiration arises, be it for the great writers of former times, or for those of to-day."

Such is, if I mistake not, the leading motive of M. Deschanel's book. We could follow, one by one, the successive applications which he makes of it, or, more exactly, the demonstrations which he seeks in Corneille's *Cid*, Rotrou's *Saint-Genest*, and Molière's *Don Juan*. But this would deny the reader the pleasure of searching for them in the book itself. It is better, more useful, and perhaps more interesting, to approach the idea boldly, and to show, even by the contradictions it gives rise to, its importance as much as its ingenuity.

Shall we accept, at the outset, M. Deschanel's definition of *romanticism*? It is true, I admit, that the word *romanticism*, after fifty years and more of passionate discussion, is none the less, even to-day, very vague and undetermined. We may therefore admit that, to a certain extent, each one of us, subject to the single condition that he defines it clearly, uses the word for that matter pretty much as he pleases. Yet, should this liberty of interpretation become even wider still, the fact remains that

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

it is limited at least by the claims of history ; and this is what M. Deschanel, in my opinion, has not taken into sufficient account. It is possible, for so it is said, that there are no longer any *romanticists*, but all the same there is no doubt that there were some formerly. Every definition of *romanticism* should therefore agree first of all with the works and the men of the well-marked historical epoch of which the very word *romanticism* remains the title in our literature. We keep on repeating and criticising the saying of the master : “The wretched words of strife, classic and romantic, have fallen into the abyss of 1830, as Gluckist and Piccinist into the gulf of 1789” ; which only means that in 1883 we are not in 1827. And it is true. But the historians of music, I imagine, do not ticket certain contents “Gluckist” or “Piccinist,” according to their own invention, caprice, or fancy ; and the one word and the other, if they do not represent anything any longer, did unquestionably represent something ; and this something is strictly defined by the very nature and opposition of the works of Gluck and Piccini. The historians of literature, in their turn, may hold such and such an idea of *romanticism* as they wish ; but if they claim to have their definition accepted, it will have necessarily to agree, and first of all, with the dramas of a Dumas and a Victor Hugo.

I do not further insist on this point, and less



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

still on the incongruity supposed to have been found in the differences of meaning which M. Deschanel has given the word *romanticism*. It is only just to observe that this book is but a beginning. M. Deschanel's predecessor in the chair at the Collège de France had attacked at the same time the very history of romanticism. But M. Deschanel, who considers romanticism in history as the last accomplished phase of one long evolution in literature, has rather proposed to find and bring to light, during the course of this evolution, the signs which prelude the future romanticism. There is in Corneille, for example, a tendency to choose subjects which are modern and living presentations, as it were, of the historical reality; in Racine, "the most vivid portrayal of the passions"; in Boileau, "bold innovations, at least in point of style and expression"; and all this is romanticism. And there is, too, in Bossuet, "audacity of expression with simplicity, familiarity united to grandeur"; in Saint-Simon, "that language gathered from everywhere, swarming with common idioms and phrases"; in Rousseau, "the passionate feeling for and true painting of exterior nature"; and all this is still romanticism. Definitions are not made *à priori*, unless perhaps in mathematics. In history, they are evolved imperceptibly from the patient study of facts. If M. Deschanel has not given us the definition of *romanticism* which we claimed a moment ago, it is really because the object of his teaching is to prepare

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

this very definition. We shall find it where it should be, at the end of the course and not at the beginning. And in the meantime M. Deschanel recognises one after the other, and tests by contact with works, and determines by history, the divers elements which finally should concur, balance in some way, and blend in the unity of the definition. This is evidently his right; he was free to choose his own method.

But then what he should have defined more strictly is what he means by this other word, very general and wide also, of *innovation* in art. For example he praises Corneille for the "innovation" in the very choice of the subject of his *Cid*, an historical subject—at least for the men of the seventeenth century—and a modern subject. But, modern subjects and historical subjects, a *Gaston de Foix*, a *Soliman*, a *Marie Stuart*, had already been performed before Corneille; and after Corneille they continued to be performed, a *Thomas Morus* and a *Comte d'Essex*, an *Osman* and a *Bajazet*, the Englishman and the Turk, and even a *Charles le Hardi, duc de Bourgogne*, if indeed this piece was ever acted. In another place, M. Deschanel honours Molière for the "innovation" of having boldly written in prose the five acts of the *Avaro*, and cites the saying of the time: "Ah, is Molière mad to think of making us swallow five acts of prose?" But, besides the fact that M. Deschanel, in regard to the authenticity of the tale, does not note that the public had "swallowed" very well, four

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

years previously, the five acts in prose of *Don Juan*—if the use of prose in the drama is an innovation which merits remark, it was assuredly not Molière who first made the venture. All the comedies of Pierre Larivey are in prose, and in prose too all the tragedies of the famous La Serre. *Le Pedant joué* of Cyrano de Bergerac, which dates from 1654, is in five acts and in prose; and the tragedy of the celebrated Abbé d'Aubignac, a *Zénobie*, given in 1645, is likewise in prose and in five acts.

I attribute no more importance than is necessary to these trifles, for they are trifles, and M. Deschanel, neglecting the exceptions, is quite right, after all, to date the "innovation" only from him who made it successful. All the same it is true that "innovation" is a delicate question in art, and I fear that M. Deschanel has not treated it fully enough. For whom must "innovation" surprise, revolt, and scandalise, to be truly "innovation"? Is it the authors? Is it the public? If it is the public, there would be nothing new in the *Cid* but the splendid revelation of Corneille's genius, since, from the first day, "all Paris had for Chimène the eyes of Rodrigue"; and, on the other hand, what would be new in the work of Molière would be his *Garcie de Navarre*, since it was this that contemporaries received the most coldly. But if it is the authors, we would need to be told which authors: Scudéri who criticises the *Cid*, or Rotrou who vindicates it, Voltaire who ridicules the *Nouvelle*

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

*Héloïse*, or Fréron who admires it, Hoffman attacking the *Martyrs*, or Fontanes celebrating them in the best verses he ever wrote, and Sainte-Beuve hesitating to recognise in the *Contemplations* the poet of the *Orientales*, or M. Vacquerie definitely tracing him in the *Quatre Vents de l'Esprit*? I make no decision, I merely state some doubts. But it will perhaps be granted that in a book where the very classics are studied only in so far as they are "revolutionary," it would not have been at all superfluous to say by what precise signs "revolutions" and "revolutionaries" in literature are to be recognised.

And yet, on this point also, M. Deschanel may have had his own reasons for refraining and withholding the definition. Or rather could he not reply that he had no need to give this very definition of "revolution" and "innovation" in art which we ask of him, since it is plainly implied in the very manner in which he has put the question? Indeed, if romanticism is for us only the last term in a long literary evolution, it is something more for M. Deschanel; it is its completion, its perfection, its crowning. And when he tells us that his admiration for the great writers of former times or to-day, "arises from the same source and the same causes," he really implies that he recognises in romanticism the bloom and flourish of what was still only in germ in our classics. The *romanticism* of Corneille is what Corneille attempted in tragedy so as to come nearer

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

the drama of Victor Hugo : the *romanticism* of Molière is what seems in Molière to prepare the drama of Victor Hugo ; the *romanticism* of Racine is the quality to be recognised in Racine which could adapt itself to the drama of Victor Hugo. And, more generally, the *romantic* elements in the *classics* are those which are capable of being utilised by romanticism. M. Deschanel calls *romantic* in the past everything *romanticism* has profited by in a time nearer our own. He also calls *innovation* everything that has been successively added, so as to become *romanticism*, to the common base of *classicism*.

It is here that we part with him. M. Deschanel has apparently another idea of a classic than we have. Who is right? Who is wrong? We shall make the reader judge by endeavouring to give this word *classic* a definite meaning. It is used somewhat at random. But in the desire to make it wide, care must be taken not to make it meaningless.

---

## II

By inveterate habit we believe that if we confer on any author, poet or prose-writer, this title of *classic*, we raise him, by the mere fact of this appellation, above all those whom we do not hail by

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

the same name. But we really only distinguish him from them, and this is by no means the same thing.

So let us not trouble with so many subtleties, and let us go back in quite a simple way to the usage. In literature, as elsewhere, in the most modest and at the same time most universal acceptance of the word, a classic is an artist in whose school we could study without fear of being misguided by his lessons or his examples. Or again, it is he who possesses, in a degree more or less eminent, the qualities whose imitation, if it cannot do any good, cannot at least do any harm. You will plainly risk nothing if you take as a model of the art of writing in prose the *Histoire de Charles XII* or the *Siècle de Louis XIV*; and, without being able to flatter yourself on ever attaining this simplicity, this ease, this propriety, the worst that can happen to you is to learn to appreciate propriety, ease, and simplicity. But, on the contrary, whoever were to take Saint-Simon as a model, and, as M. Deschanel says, "that sometimes inextricable sentence, many-headed, many-tailed, entangled, but always rolling, pushed, dragged by the flood of inexhaustible passion and suppressed rage," could contract only the worst habits of style, and ways of thinking, too, as mad as those of the noble duke, even in the most unimportant affairs.

Is this to say that the nimble and correct pencil of Voltaire is superior to the impetuous brush of

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Saint-Simon, or the brilliant pictures of the *Siècle de Louis XIV* to what M. Deschanel calls the grand frescoes of the *Memoirs*? By no means. If the possession of such and such a quality in an eminent degree is not enough to give the rank of a classic, there is this compensation that one can be a classic and yet not have the same quality to the same degree. Let us emphasise this, for here, and not elsewhere, is the point of divergence. Of Sallust and Tacitus, there is no doubt that the classic is Sallust, but no more is there any doubt that Tacitus is the greater.

It is a delicate matter to decide with sufficient exactness if there are particular qualities which make an artist really worthy of being taken as model. It has been said there are; and when this is asserted, it is added, more or less explicitly, that these should be above all qualities of order, clearness, measure, discretion, taste, . . . let us say the word, the qualities of the Mean. Now, there is no doubt, that if we attach this meaning to it, Racine would be more classic than Corneille, which strictly speaking may be admitted; only, Regnard would be more classic than Molière, which is sure to set us a-thinking; Massillon more classic than Bossuet, which we are decidedly unwilling to believe; and the good Nicole, in short, more classic than Pascal, which ends in destroying the definition. But if we note that what makes the immortal youth of the *Provinciales* is its variety of tone, as what

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

makes the unalterable beauty not only of the *Sermons* but even of the *Funeral Orations* of Bossuet is their familiarity in their highest eloquence, we see another idea of a classic already dawning.

We then begin to suspect that the qualities which just seemed of the Mean, really seemed so only by reason of their very equilibrium and the harmony of their proportions. If Massillon is to some people, in the familiar word, more touching than Bossuet, it is because, among all the qualities that constitute the orator, sensibility dominated all the others to such an extent in Massillon, that they must be sought for to be discovered and given their due. In the same way if Regnard can have been considered more gay than Molière, it is really because he is more constantly gay, being, moreover, never moved, never profound, never, in short, philosophic. And this consequence follows, that what properly constitutes a classic is the equilibrium in him of all the faculties which go to make the perfection of the work of art, a healthiness of mind, just as the healthiness of the body is the equilibrium of the forces which resist death.

A classic is a classic because in his work all the faculties find their legitimate function — without imagination overstepping reason, without logic impeding the flight of the imagination, without sentiment encroaching on the rights of good sense, without good sense chilling the warmth of sentiment, without



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

the matter allowing itself to be despoiled of the persuasive authority it should borrow from the charm of the form, and without the form ever usurping an interest which should belong only to the matter.

Is this equilibrium, or rather this balancing of all the faculties, rarer in the history of art, or commoner, than the marked predominance of one faculty over all the others, of the power of imagination, for example, over the power of abstraction, or the capacity of feeling over the capacity of reason? I should willingly believe it, for my part; but it is a question I do not wish to broach, since, whatever way it is decided, the decision does not change the condition of the problem, and the definition of a classic remains the same. What alone is important to state is that this healthiness of spirit, in this respect always to be compared with the healthiness of the body, depends hardly any less on the circumstances than on the particular nature of the subject. It is not sufficient to be born with the aptitudes which make a classic: these aptitudes must be invited or entreated to develop by the favour of a happy conjunction. We can try to determine at least some of the conditions which rule this conjunction, and thus eliminate what at first seems to be purely fortuitous.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

### III

It is evident that in the first place the language must have attained its point of perfection or maturity. The comparison, we remember, is by *La Bruyère* ; and the aptness it had even two hundred years ago is increased in our time by all the excellent reasons which have been urged for likening languages to organisms. For either this word organism means nothing, and serves only to put us on the wrong scent in our ignorance of the laws which should govern the evolution of languages, or it signifies above all that languages are born, live, and die, and, since they live, pass a point which can be justly called that of their perfection. On the one side of this point they are still in the undeveloped state of what begins to be, they have the greenness and crudeness of fruit which is not yet ripe ; and on the other side of this point they are already in the failing state of what is coming to an end. It will be noted that what we here say of languages could as well be said of the means of expression which are peculiar to each form of art. A painter, no matter how great he be, and with what marvellous faculties he be endowed, is classic only in so far as he has the good luck to be born at the precise moment of the perfection of the technical means of the art of painting. Some lovers of paradoxes believed that they dealt Raphael a fearful blow by accusing him, in a

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

word which is well worth preserving, of having been only a simple *profiteur*. It is certain that if Raphael had lived a hundred years earlier he would not have been Raphael, just as he should not have been had he been born fifty or sixty years later. But he profited from the fact that he lived at his time, and it is from this above all that he is a classic. It is not otherwise either with the classics of Greek and Latin antiquity, or with our classics of the seventeenth century, or with the classics of Spanish or Italian literature, English or German. In every other time than that in which they lived, they might perhaps have been personally what they are; but their work would certainly not have been to the same degree classic. It might have had other qualities, perhaps all the other qualities to be desired, but it would not have had those qualities which it owes to its coincidence with the point of perfection of the language; and if the word classic has any meaning, we cannot possibly deny that it is these qualities which it indicates before and above all the others. The comparison is in all points accurate. We may prefer green apples, we may prefer bletted pears, but we cannot pretend that it is just when apples are green or pears are bletted that they are ripe.

It will be asked what constitutes the perfection of a language; for it is very true that to say, as is sometimes done, that it is felt but cannot be expressed, is to elude the question and to make no reply. But,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

though there are certain questions which perhaps should be eluded, I shall add that the true difficulty does not lie there. With serious critics we would come to an agreement easily enough as to what constitutes the perfection of a language. Empirically, it would be sufficient to study closely a few masterpieces of the art of writing—a *Provinciale* or a *Sermon* of Bossuet, *Athalie* or *Tartufe*, a chapter of *Gil Blas* or the *Siècle de Louis XIV*—and to examine wherein their language is superior to works of the same kind which come immediately below them. Theoretically, there would be found, in the very nature of a language and in its conformity, more or less adherent, if I may say so, to the particular nature of the national genius, not only good reasons, but decisive reasons, for deciding at what age, at what time of its development, it has been better written than at every other time. What gives greater interest to the problem we are discussing, for this is really the point where we fail to agree, is to know, and by what signs other than those which are said to characterise it, how long this time of perfection has endured. If we succeed, we shall have determined at the same time still another condition which makes a classic.

Now it seems that in general this time of perfection lasts almost as long as the independence of a literature with respect to foreign literatures. We give and we receive, we are borrowed from and repaid, we imitate models and set up models. There is a French

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

literature which is still quite Greek and Latin, and there is another which is quite English and quite German. There is also, by compensation, an English literature which is quite French—that of the time of Charles II; and there is likewise a German literature—that which Gottsched governed. But on the other hand, there is a French literature, as well as an English and a German literature, which is deeply imprinted with the mark of the national genius, relieved, liberated to use a better word, from foreign imitation, a literature where a whole race recognises its own conception of life, its particular interpretation of nature and man, the personal turn it has given to the expression of these general sentiments which are the common patrimony and lasting heritage of humanity. This is properly what we call a classic literature. It impresses on these general sentiments, which every man who sees the light of this world is capable, since he is a man, of feeling and realising, a form so particular that its value escapes foreigners, and that one must be *national* himself to feel, to relish, and to appreciate. The historians of Italian literature call this period *il secolo d'oro*; for them it is the fifteenth century, the age of Ariosto in poetry and Machiavelli in prose. The historians of English literature call it by a more significant name, *the Augustan age*; it comprises, roughly, the time of Queen Anne and the first George, and Prior, Pope and Gay, Swift, Addison and Steele are the principal names. The

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

historians of German literature, lastly, call it by a still more expressive name, *die Periode der Originalgenies*; it extends usually from Wieland and Herder to Novalis and the two Schlegels.

In France, with all deference to those who are troubled by the memory of such greatness, it is the age of Louis XIV. The forty or fifty years of our history crowded with the work of La Fontaine, Molière, Racine, and Boileau on the one hand, and, on the other, of La Rochefoucauld, Madame de Sévigné, Pascal, and Bossuet, are as the noon of a great day, whose dawn had been announced by the work of Rabelais and Montaigne, and whose decline was yet to see the appearance of the work of Diderot and Rousseau. Nobody, I think, will dispute that the language of the author of the *Essays* or of the author of *Gargantua* is far separated from the language of which the *Maxims* and the *Provinciales* fixed the model. It will not be denied, too, that the ease of Madame de Sévigné is as distant from the ordinary awkwardness of Diderot as the natural eloquence of Bossuet is distant from the studied pomp of Rousseau. But what I wish to add is that, as in comparison with Pascal and La Rochefoucauld, Montaigne is still quite Latin and Rabelais almost quite Greek, so the translator of Stanyan and Shaftesbury is already quite English, and the author of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* and *Émile* already almost German, in comparison with Bossuet and Madame de Sévigné. Who, on

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

the contrary, can be called more thoroughly French than Racine, if it is not La Fontaine, and who more Parisian even than Molière, if it is not Boileau? There is the foundation of their popularity, of the religion, as has been said, which we always profess for them: they are French, and some even Gauls; faithful images of the race, bright, simple, and precise like it, more esteemed, in short, than loved, appreciated, or understood by foreigners. Admirable examples, accordingly, for proving what we have just advanced—that the time of the perfection of a language is measured by the very duration of its independence of foreign languages.

So the second condition doubles in a way and strengthens the first. If the classic value of a work depends, on the one hand, on the degree of advancement and perfection of the language, it depends, on the other hand, on the faithfulness with which these works interpret the national spirit. Now, as we have said, and it could easily be proved, it is just when they interpret what is inmost in the national spirit that languages attain their point of perfection. It is not then enough to be born in the time of the perfection of a language to become a classic: one must show himself worthy of his luck, and, for example, must not have employed the French language of the seventeenth century in the imitation of Spanish grandiloquence or Italian euphuism. The reader who is anxious to carry the proof to its conclusion will easily perceive that here

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

again, as above, the generalisation includes the classics of painting as well as those of literature. For, as there are classics of Italian painting, there are also of Flemish and Dutch painting, and they are what they are exactly from the same reasons, or, in other words, under the same conditions. They painted during the precise time of the perfection of the technical means of their art, and, what is more, their painting expressed, with forms and colours, as much of the national character as it could.

This is not all, and there is wanting a last condition. Those alone really are classics, in the full meaning of the word, who can join to the good fortune we have just mentioned, the good fortune also of having lived in the time of the perfection of their literary form. For the forms, too, have only one time. Like languages they too live, and when they have ended living, like languages, they die. When Shakespeare, in England, and his contemporaries or immediate successors had, so to speak, exhausted all the vitality of the drama, once it had been clearly defined, in vain did Dryden in the seventeenth century, and Addison at the beginning of the eighteenth, endeavour to renew it by remodelling it on French tragedy. On the other hand, in France, it was useless for Voltaire to flatter himself, in the incessant search for novelty—and his drama has at least the merit of being a very interesting proof of this—on reviving the tragedy of the seventeenth century; Corneille and



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Racine had exhausted all the power of that dramatic form. On the contrary, on both sides of the Channel, in the country of Le Sage as in that of Richardson, the novel, before reaching its true home, had been dragged clumsily from adventure to adventure, and had barely given some promise—in the *Princesse de Clèves* or the *Roman Comique*—of what it could be, and one day was to be. This is why, in the history of our literature as in that of English literature, the classics of the novel belong to the eighteenth century.

The reason, if any is needed—for, after all, it might have been sufficient to have here noted the facts—is that every form has its laws, which depend much less than is thought on the changes of fashion and some or other supposed revolution in taste. The prettiest theories on the liberty of art and the blending of the forms will never make us seek at the theatre the same emotion we seek in reading a book. One might as well say that the same pleasure, and the same kind of pleasure, is derived from works of painting and sculpture. But, evidently, if it is not the same pleasure (and everybody will admit it), the means of satisfying it cannot be the same; and, once this single point is granted, there follow from it the laws, rules, methods, or conditions (the word is of no consequence) which determine the perfection of each form. And once this perfection is attained, it is no longer possible to surpass it. I appear to be saying something absurd. So let me express this in a more concrete way.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

If anyone, like Bossuet, for example, has once attained the perfection of the funeral oration, it will not be given, in the French language, to a Bourdaloue, or a Fénelon, or a Massillon, even though classics themselves, to surpass or equal Bossuet. They will be able to do otherwise, according to the saying of one of them, but whatever they do they will undoubtedly do less well.

---

### IV

WHEN these three conditions concur, or, as is said, converge, it is then that classic works appear, those alone to which, in the history of literature as in the history of art, the word is exactly applicable. That there are other works on which we can justly exhaust all our expressions of admiration matters little: they are not classic as soon as one or other of these three conditions is wanting. The famous Jean-Baptiste Rousseau has for long been counted among the classics of our lyric poetry; but we have since perceived that, of the many odes and cantatas which used to be praised, there is not one which is truly lyric, that is to say, which vibrates with the personal emotion of the poet; lyric poetry in France was still too far away from the perfection of its form: Jean-Baptiste Rousseau is not a classic. But in our time, on the other hand, high as are raised the Lamartines, the

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Mussets, and the Hugos, no more are they classics, and never will they be : they are too far away from the time of the perfection of the language, and foreign literatures have left too deep a mark on them. Certain songs of Béranger, who is less literary in every respect, and moreover hardly a poet, but Gallic in spirit, are nearer the classic form.

I have evidently chosen this last example purposely. For there are few which prove more clearly how far the true notion of a classic can be immaterial, and in some way exterior, to any judgment on the individual worth of the writer. We are accustomed in our day—and many clever people are not far from finding in it the last word of criticism—to confound the works with the writers, as if there were not masterpieces in the history of literature or art whose author was a downright fool, or as if it were difficult to cite absolutely mediocre works from the hand of a man of vast intelligence. The worth of a man is, however, one thing ; the worth of a work is another. There may be an entire agreement and similarity between the man and his work : there can, on the contrary, be dissimilarity and contradiction. The work may then be classic, and so, in certain respects, superior to that which we do not honour with the same name, but the man may be very inferior (I mean in originality of intellect) to him whose work will never be classic. It has chanced in the history of our literature that the classic epoch was at the same time that of some of

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

the greatest men we can name. But it could be otherwise. And, indeed, it is otherwise in the history of English literature, where the truly classic poets, of whom the most illustrious is Pope, are inferior in every point, except the privilege of the time in which they lived, to those who preceded them, as Dryden perhaps, Milton, and Shakespeare, or to those who followed them, as Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley.

There is nothing more difficult to understand, nor more troublesome to the literary historian, than the question whether there is included under the name of classic the idea of a personal superiority of the artist or writer. What, on the other hand, more simple, if, as I have tried to show, the man who is really a classic is in some way so in spite of himself, just as there are so many people who, thank heaven, keep in good health without any other care than that of letting themselves live? We recall the well-known saying of Courier: "The merest empty-headed woman at this time (the age of Louis XIV) had more influence on the language than a Jean-Jacques and a Diderot." But there is not the slightest doubt that this saying never meant, either to Courier or to anybody else, that the *Memoirs* of Madame de Lafayette, or the *Souvenirs* of Madame de Caylus, was a greater event in the history of the human mind than the *Contrat social*, for example, or that voluminous but perfectly unreadable *Encyclopædia*. Only, the "merest empty-headed woman" of that time was of that time, and

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

that time was the time of the perfection of the national language, and when Jean-Jacques and Diderot came it was passed, and neither their power nor even that of a greater was able to restore it. There is the chief point, there the essential element in the definition of a classic. The classics are writers who live in a given time, which, in the history of every literature as of every art, is given by the conjunction of the general conditions which we have endeavoured to determine, and these conditions are given in their turn by general events of history. When these conditions are not yet fully realised—from reasons which vary with each art and in each literature—the time has not yet come. When these conditions begin to fail, and, so to speak, to lose the power which they exercised, the time is past. But, reciprocally, as long as it lasts, the works which are born, as it were, under the conjunction of these three conditions are properly what we agree to call classics. If the high personal worth of an artist is joined to them, as in our classic French literature and in German classic literature, so much the better, and the works are, perhaps, more classic ; but they are not less classic if, as in English literature and in Italian literature, poets and prose writers are lacking in an originality which may be noted before their time and will be noted after them ; and this is the point which must be emphasised.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

### V

M. DESCHANEL'S book is a clever attempt to establish a new relation between these three terms—romanticism, literary revolution, and classicism. What the attempt is worth, and how far it has succeeded, we shall be able to say presently. We have only to see, indeed, what becomes of M. Deschanel's theory when the generic word *classics* is replaced, in his definition of romanticism, as in his idea of literary revolutions, by the definition we have just given.

First of all it is clearly evident that if certain classic authors were, as I agree with M. Deschanel, bold revolutionaries—Molière and Racine, for example, with us, or Goethe and Schiller in Germany—it is neither as classics that they were revolutionaries, nor as revolutionaries that they have remained classics for us. Had they been more timid revolutionaries, and even had they done nothing at all by way of reformation or change in their art, they would be classics none the less. There are numerous examples to prove this. Thus, in the history of the French drama, if there is anyone who answers to the average idea of a classic, it is assuredly the author of the *Légataire universel* or the *Joueur*, and I think we would be rather embarrassed to say what revolution he made. But, on the contrary, there are many others, each of whom in his time added something positively new to his art, La Chaussée, for example, the in-

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

ventor of the "comédie larmoyante," or Diderot, the inventor of the "tragédie bourgeoise," who are incontestably not classics. Similarly, in the history of French prose, to whom shall we give the name of classic, if not to the author of the *Histoire de Charles XII* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV*? But who on the other hand is not of opinion, on comparing him with the author of the *Nouvelle Héloïse* and the *Confessions*, that the second is the innovator, and the less classic? And likewise, too, in the history of French poetry; to take names nearer our time, if Victor Hugo is assuredly the revolutionary, must we not admit that Alfred de Musset is unquestionably much nearer the common idea of a classic?

It is quite possible then, that, there are sometimes the meeting and concurrence in a great writer, as in Molière or Racine, Pascal or Bossuet, of the boldness which makes the innovator, and the perfection which makes the classic. But it is the exception. And in any case, if we have introduced into our definition of a classic all it should contain, and nothing but what it should contain, not only is it not enough, but it is also useless to "innovate" in order to become a classic. I shall not waste time in showing that the converse is true, and that it is plainly not enough to be counted among the classics to have made many innovations. But it should at least be shown that in the case of Corneille or Molière, the innovations for which M. Deschanel took delight in praising them are un-

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

doubtedly the least classic thing in their work, and in them.

Some one has made bold to say—it is M. Guizot, I think—of the great Corneille himself, that he is not a classic. Without going quite so far, it is certain that neither his work as a whole is classic, nor his masterpieces themselves classic in all their parts. M. Deschanel, however, does not seem to doubt for a moment that, if there is a classic in the history of our literature, it is the author of *Nicomède* and *Don Sanche a' Aragon*. And what he chiefly admires in Corneille is doubtless to a certain extent what everybody admires, but it is above all, as he says, “the painting of human life in its complexity and divers aspects, now exalted, now reduced, by means of these mixed dramas, at once familiar and heroic, and also of these expressions taken from the common language of everyday life, which often surprise but are none the less just and true”; and this is what he calls expressly the romanticism of Corneille. Now even admitting, which is not the case, that Corneille made a revolution in bringing on to the stage this “mixed drama, at once heroic and familiar,” it is just because he was too often unable to separate these two elements, the heroic and the familiar, which cross and combat and injure each other in his work, that he has not succeeded in reaching the classic perfection of his form. In the same way also it is precisely from abounding in “expressions taken from the common language of



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

everyday life," and which almost everywhere, when they are not in dreadful contradiction with the sentiment the poet means to express or the effect he means to produce, jar on his naturally pompous language, that Corneille has not attained the classic perfection of language and of the art of writing in verse. He is therefore romantic in so far as he is not classic, and not, as M. Deschanel would hold, classic in so far as he had been romantic. Need we go further? It would be possible. I should be tempted to say, indeed, that Corneille is classic from his good qualities and romantic from his faults. But the example which M. Deschanel has chosen in Molière is the best proof of the paradox I could wish.

"Let us admit at once," he says, "that Molière's *Don Juan*, though very remarkable in many respects, especially from the point of view of our present subject, is yet, to say the word, a little patched up, not very well put together, mixed up of incongruous elements, but nevertheless extremely romantic." We are entirely in accord with M. Deschanel on this point. It is not only the three unities which Molière violated in his *Don Juan*; the unity of the character and of the type of the principal personage is strangely disfigured in each successive act. Nobody is unaware, further, that the piece was composed for the occasion, and, while admirable at certain places where the hand of Molière regains its cunning, was wretchedly written, and for the purpose

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

of turning to account, for the greater profit of the theatre till, a subject with which the public was so keenly smitten, that, between 1659 and 1667, not speaking of that which was acted by the Italians, we have no less than four dramatic readings of *Festin de Pierre*. Need I say that the unities are violated in the three others with the same violence as in that of Molière? But if it was enough to advertise a *Festin de Pierre* to attract the public, where, we ask, was Molière's "innovation"? We ask, too, where was his "romanticism," since, in the three or four other *Don Juans*, changes of scenery, variety of incidents, and stage-tricks are also to be found. We are thus reduced to the conclusion that the most "romantic" element in Molière's *Don Juan* is its incoherence, its incongruity, its absolute lack of unity, all eminently romantic, I admit, but assuredly very little classical. Molière's romanticism in his *Don Juan* consists in his *Don Juan* being prodigiously inferior to his classic masterpieces.

Is this enough to entitle us to inscribe Corneille or Molière among the precursors of romanticism? If not, the discussion is closed and the case is heard. But if it is, we must then impose on ourselves a definition of romanticism, which, far from agreeing in any point with the definition of classicism, would now oppose it in absolute contradiction.

Indeed, he who talks about perfection—perfection of the language or perfection of a form—evidently

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

implies separation, distinction, and choice. The perfection of a language is constituted by the choice, among all the forms that can serve equally well for the expression of the same thought, of the only form that is suitable to the time, the circumstances, and the subject. All the others fall, one alone remains and survives. The language of Corneille, in his poor passages, is, with just a little more force and happiness of expression, the language of Mairet and Scudéri ; in his good passages, it is the same language, purged only of its excess of grandiloquence and preciousity : and it is the classic language. Similarly the perfection of a form is constituted by the choice, among all the forms that could almost equally well have been used, of the form most sure to suit the end in view. All the others are more or less suitable, but only one among them all is more suitable than the others. Thus, in the dramatic system of the three unities, every means that can serve for the concentration of the action is one step accomplished towards the perfection of the form—the comedy of Molière or the tragedy of Racine. Now, from this very choice, there necessarily results an elimination of all the other forms. These other forms may be adopted, they may be worked up, and they may sometimes be successful. And this is romanticism, but it is classicism no longer.

It remains for me to show this briefly, and that our admiration for the great writers of former times and for those of to-day, far from being derived, as

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

M. Deschanel holds, from the "same source and the same causes," is derived, on the contrary, from the most contrary causes and the most different source possible. Romanticism is no random revolution, but a revolution to restore to honour all that classicism had, if not dogmatically condemned, at least effectually rejected. I speak of the classics of the seventeenth century and not of the pseudo-classics of the Empire.

In the matter of language, in the first place, and under the specious enough pretext of restoring its ancient liberty, romanticism neglected nothing that could possibly make it fall from the point of perfection to which the classics had carried it. Excess leads to excess, I am not unaware. The so-called philosophical grammarians of the eighteenth century had weakened the language to such an extent that it was absolutely necessary to give it a little body or to cease to write. But the error of romanticism, animated as it was by a hatred of all the classics without distinction, by a stupid hatred, was to leap, so to speak, over the seventeenth century, and to carry us back to the period of perhaps the worst disorder and the greatest confusion of the language. If it was not declared in precise terms, it was thought, in the *cénacle* of the romanticists, that Racine wrote badly in comparison with Du Bartas, and that Corneille himself, though often emphatic, and occasionally even somewhat low, was really only a schoolboy in comparison with Baïf and

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Jodelle. Thus was lost the benefit of the purification which the language had undergone, from various influences, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and which perhaps we may be said not to have yet recovered. . . . I merely indicate here the development. Every question relative to the state of a language, in any period of its history, exacts too cumbersome an equipment of examples and proofs to be treated in passing.

It will be easier to show that romanticism was mistaken in a like manner as to the reformation, though that also was necessary, of tragedy. A single question suffices. Where is the drama—a synthesis at once of the comedy of Molière and the tragedy of Racine—where is the drama which the romantic *Préfaces* promised us so solemnly? Is it *Le Roi s'amuse*? Is it *Les Burgraves*, perhaps? Is it *Henri III et sa Cour*? Is it *Christine, ou Stockholm, Fontainebleau, et Rome*? The truth is that if the romanticists understood that the time of the tragedy of Corneille and Racine was past, they did not understand that the time was still further past, if I may say so, of the drama of Shakespeare and Lope de Vega. "The *Cid* entered on the true way, on the modern way," says M. Deschanel, "that of the *drama*, under the name of *tragi-comedy*." I shall ask him then what he thinks we have met in this way during the nearly eighty years since "the absurd tyranny of the three unities" has ceased to dominate the French theatre

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

and to trammel the liberty of an Alexandre Dumas and a Victor Hugo. For I consider that of the two poets whom I name, the former, Dumas, had in no less degree than Racine himself the instinct of dramatic situation, and if I add that the latter, Hugo, is no less a poet than Corneille, M. Deschanel, no doubt, will not contradict me.

Would this not simply mean that this form of the drama, as well in the nineteenth as the seventeenth century, does not agree with the national spirit? What happened in England when Dryden and Addison attempted to acclimatise French tragedy in the land of Shakespeare, happened with us when we tried to accommodate to the French temperament the drama of Shakespeare. It is really not very philosophical to regret that Corneille or Racine was not Shakespeare, and to throw on four poor old pedants who are now forgotten the responsibility of what is deliberately called the "archæological, artificial, and composite character" of our French drama. Why not rather be content with being what one is, and not affect this silly regret for not being English or Spanish? For the whole matter lies there. The question of the three unities was discussed by the English too. Ben Jonson, the great rival of Shakespeare, upheld the rule of twenty-four hours no less ardently than an Abbé d'Aubignac himself. The English chose liberty; the French preferred rule. Liberty is good, but rule is good

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

also. *Julius Cæsar* is a fine drama; *Bajazet* is not a bad tragedy. The *Merry Wives of Windsor* is one of the most humorous pieces; *Tartufe* may pass as a good enough comedy. Shakespeare is English, Racine is French, Warwickshire is not Champagne, and Paris is not London: what would you have them do?

The romanticists believed that they would do something, and, victims of this generous illusion, they frankly threw themselves headlong into the imitation of foreign literatures. This abandonment of the national tradition is not what separates them the least profoundly from our classics. Spain, Italy, Germany, England (with its colonies)—where, to what country of the habitable world have they not gone to seek motives of inspiration? But what have they brought back, for the most part, but tinsel and spangle, local colour, as they said, oddities, monstrosities above all, when they had the luck to meet with them, but nothing solid, nothing durable, nothing that could stand, nothing truly English, and with better reason, as may be thought, nothing truly French?

I do not mean to examine in this connection the question if here are not to be found the signs of the future formation of a European literature. This literature existed in the Middle Ages. And from one end of civilised Europe to the other, under the law of Christianity, ideas and sentiments were ex-

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

changed, thanks to Latin, it is true, in a form which was neither French, English, Spanish, nor German. Modern nationalities were then in what might be called a state of indecision. It is quite possible that peoples, who are now less strictly confined within their frontiers, are about to lose the traits which characterise them as peoples, in the same way that by exchange of communication our old provinces have lost something of their former originality. The time seems to be approaching when literary work will no longer betray its national origin but by touches singularly delicate and difficult to distinguish. But, once again, I am forgetting. We are not dealing with romanticism in itself, nor in its consequences, but with romanticism in its connection with classicism, and the formula for it which M. Deschanel has proposed. And if we have defined the classics correctly, it is evident that there is absolutely nothing more unlike a romanticist than a classic.

They are precisely at the two poles of the history of our national literature. We can admire them in their turn, we even must, if we have 'breadth of sympathy,' that fine phrase for what after all is little else than indifference; we can hardly admire them together, no more than we can admire at the same time the regularity of 'good sense' and the riot of imagination, perfection in rhythm and indifference to canon; but we cannot by any means admire them from the same reasons; or they are then so general



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

that they cannot truly be called reasons. If every kind of painting or every kind of music interests the same senses, the one the eyes and the other the ear, shall we say on that account that our admiration is derived from the same source and the same causes? It is with the eyes that I admire a *Madonna* of Raphael, and it is with the eyes that I admire a *Kermesse* of Rubens: only the whole question is the particular nature of my admiration.

We cannot conclude and take leave of M. Deschanel without thanking him for the opportunity he has given us of discussing a question whose stimulating interest we would like to have made the reader recognise. I shall not assume that in a subject such as this it matters little whether or not we are of accord: I have the weakness to believe that, on the contrary, it matters a good deal. But it matters much more still that literary criticism and literary history, instead of proceeding, as M. Deschanel has said, from its first chapter and its first lecture "to sink purely and simply in the quicksands of philology," should sometimes think also of awakening ideas. Herein lies the value of M. Deschanel's book. An idea dominates the subject. The facts are of no value in themselves, but only in so far as they help to demonstrate the idea. The digressions, too, by a deviation which is sometimes rather long, but always easily followed, lead back and link on to the idea. And whether we have the better of

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

M. Deschanel, or M. Deschanel the better of us, such books do more good to those who read them than the very bulky and withal very estimable works, which doubtless pretend to greater erudition.

## IMPRESSIONIST CRITICISM

WHEN a man himself follows the profession or business of criticism, it is always easy—and sometimes tempting—to oppose his opinion to that of his colleagues, to praise the novel they condemn, and find fault with the writer they admire ; but it is not so easy to assume the airs of judging them themselves and to affect in this way a sort of superiority over them. This smacks, as the phrase goes, of the pedantry of the schools. But what is much more difficult still, and may reasonably appear rather presumptuous, is to reproach them with understanding their science or their art badly because they understand it differently than we do, to dare to tell them so, and to claim, in short, that their way of thinking should yield to and coincide with ours. Yet we must do so : in the first place, that we may not be imposed upon—the most unpardonable thing in the world in this age of Americanism ; and further, because in this kind of quarrel, as we shall see immediately, questions of persons include questions of principles. Born before us and destined to survive us, criticism would have been dead long ago, had it not an object, a rôle, and a function, exterior and superior to

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

the idea formed of it by M. Anatole France, M. Jules Lemaître, M. Paul Desjardins, and some others whom I could mention—and myself.

Need I say that I have the greatest respect for M. Anatole France, for his kindly, ironical, and dainty manner, where such subtle thoughts are so prettily veiled, with such elegance, indifference, and sometimes even negligence? I have hardly less respect for M. Jules Lemaître; and, with all Paris, I enjoy, as I well may, his learned pranks, where so much simplicity, and ingenuousness even, is always allied to so much wit, and sometimes so much sense. His masterpiece is perhaps the funeral oration on Victorine Demay—of the ‘Concert d’Horloge’ or the ‘Ambassadeurs’—and the account he has left us of the interview of the popular singer with the learned author of the *General and Comparative History of Semitic Languages*. Nobody, moreover, writes better than he does, in a style more lively, more supple, and more full of surprises: he plays with words, he does what he likes with them, he juggles with them. And I esteem also M. Paul Desjardins for his anxious care, his good will, his studied endeavour to be agreeable to those he likes, for the touching sadness with which he tells them the most unpleasant things. But, with all their talent, I am afraid they may manage to lead criticism into a grievous path, and if I see great difficulties in it, why should I not point them out? I like all three very much, but I still prefer criticism; and I

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

do not think they will be annoyed at it, and the reader will commend me for it.

M. Paul Desjardins said this just the other day, in reference to M. Taine ; and M. Jules Lemaître has said this twenty times if he has said it once ; but it is perhaps M. Anatole France, in an article on M. Jules Lemaître, who has most energetically claimed for criticism the right of being henceforth only personal, impressionist, and, as is said, *subjective*. "Objective criticism does not exist any more than objective art, and all those who are pleased to think they put something else than themselves into their work are dupes of the most fallacious philosophy. The truth is we can never come out of ourselves. It is one of our greatest misfortunes. What would we not give to see, for one minute, the skies and the earth with the facet-eye of a fly, or to understand nature with the rude and simple brain of an orang-outang ? But this is quite forbidden us. We are shut up in our personality as in a perpetual prison. The best thing we can do, it seems to me, is to recognise this sorry condition with a good grace and to admit that we speak of ourselves every time we have not the strength to hold our tongue." It would really be impossible to insinuate more cleverly anything more "fallacious," to confuse with greater adroitness ideas which are more distinct, and, in short, to affirm with greater assurance that there is nothing assured.

That this manner of understanding criticism has,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

moreover, great advantages, I do not deny. It allows, or rather it authorises, every compliance and every contradiction. The 'relativity' of changing impressions explains everything and answers everything. In giving us its opinions not as true, but as 'its own,' impressionist criticism provides itself with a means of changing them, which we know it does not abstain from using. It dispenses accordingly with studying the books it talks about or the subjects those books treat, and this is sometimes a considerable gain. "Need I endeavour to tell you the impression I felt on reading the second volume of the *History of the People of Israel*?" asked M. Anatole France a short time ago. "Need I show you the state of my mind when I dreamt between its pages?" And, without awaiting our reply—for, after all, we others, officers of the 199th infantry, or merchants of the Rue du Sentier, I suppose, and good people of Carpentras or Landerneau, why should we be so curious of M. France's state of mind?—M. France tells us that while he was a child he had among his toys "a Noah's Ark, painted red, with all the animals in pairs, and Noah and his children most beautifully shaped." If the process is ingenious, it is apparently eminently convenient. Thanks to his Noah's Ark, M. Anatole France found it quite unnecessary to read the *History of the People of Israel*; he dreamt *between* the pages of the book; and, as he is M. France, he spoke of it none the less pleasantly.

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

A little less pleasantly, if we must be sincere, but in the same manner did M. Paul Desjardins speak the other day about the fifth volume of the *Origins of Contemporary France*. He said that M. Taine saw Bonaparte and the Revolution with the eyes of M. Taine, and he added, or at least gave us to understand, that his—Desjardins's—eyes were not those of M. Taine, and he described another Revolution and another Bonaparte. But which Bonaparte and which Revolution? He took care not to tell us; and, after all, why did he not, since every Revolution and every Bonaparte is equally legitimate, I mean to say equally true? Would it not be amusing if M. Paul Desjardins has an opinion on Bonaparte or the Revolution which the labours of M. Taine aimed at obliging him to change? But if he has no opinion, shall we require that he should find one before speaking of M. Taine or his book? This is yet another advantage in impressionist criticism: it dispenses with conclusions. *Quot capita, tot sensus*, so said the rudiments: since we can never be freed from ourselves, what is the good of trying? What more useless and more fatiguing? What more fatiguing, since it is undoubtedly no small matter to form a reasoned opinion on the Revolution: what more useless, since M. Paul Desjardins, M. Jules Lemaître, and M. Anatole France think so, and since we disguise ourselves to no purpose, for we can never express anything but our 'personal preferences.'

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

But I should have liked them not to be content with thinking it and saying it, I should have liked them to endeavour to prove it: for this they have forgotten to do. Metaphors are not reasons. Assuredly if we had the 'facet-eye of a fly' or 'the rude and simple brain of an orang-outang,' our vision of the world would be different, and it would be above all less complex and less contradictory; it does not seem to be proved that it would be so different as it appears to be laid down in theory, and we know, for example, that in many animals the sensations of form and colour are similar enough to ours. But what is more certain still is that we are neither flies nor orang-outangs; we are men, and we are so chiefly from the power we have of going out of ourselves to seek and find and recognise ourselves in others. Impressionist or subjective, when criticism borrows arguments from metaphysics, without even taking the trouble to consider their bearing, it forgets that the value of these arguments is purely metaphysical. I mean to say that we may well discuss whether colour is a quality of coloured objects or a mere sensation of the eyes; but, sensation of the eyes or quality of the objects, it is all one to us, and of no importance; and, in one case as in the other, things happen in the same way. Red is always red, and green is always green. Similarly, if what is square is not round, what is round is not square. Although we can speak of the *relativity* of our



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

impressions or the *subjectivity* of our sensations, the capacity of feeling and experiencing them, which is alike in every one of us if not always the same, and of the same nature if not the same degree, is one of the characteristics of the species, not to say a part of the definition of man. So let us leave the flies and the orang-outangs: we have nothing to do with them, and they only cause confusion. What is fallacious, let us say so in our turn, is to misuse words so as to throw us off the scent as to the real meaning of things. The deception, if there must be deception, is to believe and teach that we cannot come out of ourselves, when, on the contrary, life is taken up with nothing else. And the reason will doubtless appear strong enough if we take into account that otherwise there would be neither society, language, literature, nor art.

We are asked, it is true, where then arise the difficulties in agreement, and how does it come about that in matters of art and literature opinions are so varied? For they seem at least to be so: and, to say nothing of our contemporaries—whom we agree we do not see from a sufficient distance or height,—how many judgments, how many diverse judgments, have been given, for the last three or four hundred years, on a Corneille or a Shakespeare, a Cervantes or a Rabelais, a Raphael or a Michael Angelo! Just as there is no extravagant or absurd opinion that some philosopher or other has not held,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

so there is none that is scandalous, or hostile to genius, that cannot find authority in the name of some critic. Poets and novelists, moreover, have not been treated any better by themselves: Ronsard abused Rabelais, and Corneille, we know, never understood Racine: he even openly declared his preference for Boursault. What does this mean but that we are shut up in our personality as in a 'perpetual prison,' and whatever effort we make to escape from it wearies us and confines us the more closely.

It is this I take the liberty of denying; and our impressionist critics here think themselves too original. It is not true that opinions are so diverse, nor differences so deep. "Among true mandarins of letters"—the phrase is M. Jules Lemaître's—"it is agreed that such writers, whatever may be their faults or their manias, *exist*, as is said, and are worth the trouble of being closely examined." Here is the first point: Racine exists, Voltaire exists, I mean the author of *Zaïre*, *Alzire*, or *Tancrède*; Campistron does not exist, nor the Abbé Leblanc, nor M. de Jouy. And here is a second: there are degrees between Campistron and Voltaire, there are other degrees between *Zaïre* and *Bajazet*, there are degrees everywhere, and there is nobody who will not admit it. We may not agree as to the degrees. We may scoff at those who 'fix the rank.' We cannot refuse to put Victor Hugo above M. Vacquerie, Lamartine above Madame Desbordes-

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Valmore, Balzac above Charles de Bernard; and neither M. France, nor M. Lemaître, nor M. Desjardins has ever tried it, or ever will try it. And to these two points I add a third: 'faults' or 'manias,' they are just what some will like in Balzac or Hugo, what others will like less, what others still will censure, but which all will recognise. And, even when it is a contemporary writer, look at what M. France in the *Temps*, M. Lemaître in the *Revue bleue*, and M. Desjardins in the *Journal des Débats* have said of the author of the *Rêve* and the *Bête humaine*; the whole difference lies in what they have unduly infused of their personality, of the expression of their personal sympathies, in what they considered they had to say of M. Zola: there is only a change of words.

But I am wrong in saying 'unduly.' We are not capable of divesting ourselves so completely of our own personality, that nothing, absolutely nothing, of ourselves mingles with our judgments. We are too fond of ourselves for that! In literature, as in everything, we go to those who flatter us, or who we believe will help us. I wish to make a larger allowance still for our impressionists. Literary opinion is the complex product of three unequal terms. In a literary work, poem, drama, or novel, we find in the first place what we bring to it of ourselves, what we put into it of our inmost per-

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

sonality; and, in this sense, as has been said, we make its beauty. Some take greater pleasure in *Candide*, and others prefer *Paul et Virginie*. We find, next, what their admirers or critics have put into it, the good qualities or faults which time, alone, in its imperceptible course, has added, and which were not for contemporaries. Contemporaries did not see in the *École des Femmes* or *Tartufe* what we see, and with good reason, for Molière did not think of it. No more did they see in *Cléopâtre* or the *Grand Cyrus* the tediousness, the dulness, the insipidity which we do, for they did not think so quickly, they read more slowly, and they were less refined. But, lastly, must we not find in *Cléopâtre* and *Tartufe* and *Candide* something also that La Calprenède and Molière and Voltaire did put into them? No matter what we be, who can arouse in ourselves fixed impressions, must there not be in *Candide* and *Tartufe* some qualities to fix them or arouse them? And is it not true that these qualities, whatever they be of themselves, are not to be found in a novel of the younger Crébillon or in a comedy of Poisson or Montfleury?

This is all that is necessary to establish *objective* criticism. When we have got a clear idea of the true nature of our impressions—which is not always easy, and which is always a slow matter: when we have made allowance, which is much more difficult still, for prejudice, for education, for the

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

age, for example or authority in our impressions, there remains a work, a man, and a date. This is enough. We can try to fix this date exactly, and determine consequently in what time, at what moment of literary history, in what social surroundings, amid what circumstances the man lived and the work appeared. We can try to say what the man was, what kind of a man, sad or gay, humble or of high rank, worthy of hate or admiration. For generations inherit, more than they believe, from everything that has preceded them: Nisard loved to say that the most living thing in the present, at all times, is the past. And we can then try, after such an explanation, to classify and judge this work. This is the whole object of criticism. What do we see there that is not *objective*, and that is not or cannot be independent of personal tastes, of the private sympathies of him who tries to explain, classify, and judge? And if this is not to be seen, or if it cannot be mentioned, what remains of the insinuating paradoxes of M. Anatole France, the sparkling paradoxes of M. Jules Lemaître, and the peevish paradoxes of M. Paul Desjardins?

Shall I here insist on the obligation of judging? Shall I remind them that it is as much as implied in the very etymology of the word criticism? Or shall I show that few judges at this very day are more resolute judges than our impressionists? The *Contemporains* of M. Jules Lemaître is nothing but

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

a collection of judgments—on men, it is true, rather than on works—and its ‘impressionism,’ after all, consists almost only in the malice or whimsicality of the motives which influence them. Who then has been severer and harder—on M. George Ohnet, for example, or M. Émile Zola—than the sceptical, indulgent, and cheerful M. France? ‘Extravagance,’ ‘platitute,’ ‘tediousness,’ ‘wretched rhapsodies,’ ‘abominable insipidities,’ M. France lost that day even his attic—or rather alexandrian—style, on which he usually piques himself. And could I not cite judgments of M. Desjardins, which, though less brilliant, are no less decisive? Heaven protect me from reproaching them for these judgments! I do not dislike a rhapsody being called by its proper name, nor a thought being freely uttered. In literature, as elsewhere, it would only be for the better if this were done oftener, and more boldly. But what is this affectation of pretending not to judge when one really does judge, of giving us as ‘impressions’ judgments which our conscience tells us we regard as such, and, when one thing is done, of trying to persuade us it is another?

In truth I well know that if they undergo, whether they will or not, the obligation of judging, for that is in the nature of things, our impressionists flatter themselves, on the other hand, on escaping from the necessity of classifying. To classify they say is to fix the rank, to distribute prizes, to put Balzac above

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Flaubert, or a tragedy of Racine above a vaudeville of Labiche; and this work is in their eyes just the very acme of absurdity. Don't speak to them only of comparing men and works! Is every pleasure not as good as another?—I mean those which are called æsthetic. What is the use of comparing the *Fleurs du mal* with the *Méditations*? The *Cid* is a fine thing; *Andromaque* is another; is that any reason why *Ruy Blas* should not be a third? If I prefer *Valentine* to the *Cousine Bette*, what ground and what right has anyone to try to make me change or reverse the order of my preferences? Is each one of us not a little universe for himself alone? Is variety not a necessary condition of pleasure? For of what do we not weary? What then more barbarous or more inhuman, say they, than thus to try to place on every head, in the name of theoretic principle and abstract ideal, the heavy level of the same definitions, the same rules, or the same laws? So let the world go its own way, and let each one of us appear just as he is. If he discovers in himself some curious failing, or the germ of some hidden flaw, let him, instead of destroying it, cultivate it: and let him make with it, if he can, a means of literary existence, a reputation, and an income.

In opposition to these theories, I cannot discuss the principles of the classification of literary forms: it would take up too much space and time. But I shall be content to reply to our impressionists that they

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

have perhaps not sufficiently considered either the nature of classification or of comparison. Would it not really be very extraordinary that, in an age like ours, where the comparative method has renewed almost everything, criticism alone should refuse its assistance, so as not to expose itself to the witticisms of certain philologers or certain anatomists who live in their seminaries or their laboratories only to compare old texts or old bones? Why, this would be a useful, interesting, and fruitful work, to compare the calcaneum or the navicular of the Lemuridæ with that of the Simiadæ, or the metre and the assonances of the *Chanson de Roland* with the assonances of the *Chanson d'Aiol*; but it would be a waste of time to compare the tragedy of Racine with the drama of Shakespeare, or the novel of Fielding with that of Balzac. And as to the 'relativity' of things, what comes of that now? A man is neither big, nor small, nor thin, nor stout, nor beautiful, nor ugly; he is only *more* ugly or *more* beautiful, *more* stout or *more* thin, *more* small or *more* big than another, than the others, than the average of his race and species. So also a work of art is what it is, succeeds in being so, and is so fully and decidedly, only in so far as it is compared with another. *Zaire* would be a beautiful tragedy if there was no *Bajazet*, and we would doubtless still read the *Doyen de Killerine* or *Cleveland* with avidity, if we did not know the novels of George Sand and Balzac. All the progress that



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

criticism can flatter itself on having accomplished during this century is due to this kind of comparison; and it is possible that this mania of comparing, if it is persisted in, may be a sign of slowness or narrowness of spirit: but in the meantime I recommend it none the less to all those who believe they should place truth above themselves and the interests of their own particular talent.

As to the power and, if I may say so, the virtue of classification, so many philosophers, so many scholars have spoken of it so well, that I hardly know whom I should here call to my aid, a Hæckel or an Agassiz, a Stuart Mill or an Auguste Comte. I could add also the Darwins and Huxleys. The fine *Essay on Classification* by Agassiz is a book which our impressionists cannot be too strongly advised to read. But if they prefer to have a Frenchman cited, Auguste Comte has shown quite as well, in his *Positivist Philosophy*, that "in whatever kind of intellectual work, be it scientific, literary, artistic, as well as in natural history, "a methodical classification is not only the indispensable summary of the actual system of our knowledge, but also the chief logical instrument of its subsequent perfection." And how, in the hierarchy of the forms, could we place tragedy, for example, above melodrama, *Polyeucte* above the *Tour de Nesle*, or, in the novel, *Père Goriot* above the *Exploits de Rocambole*, without giving our reasons? How could we give these without penetrating further

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

into the knowledge of the history, the evolution, and the essence of the form? And the further we penetrated, how could these very reasons, whether 'subjective' or personal, fail to become more and more general, and properly 'objective'? After the obligation of judging, the necessity of classifying thus seems strictly inherent in the very notion of criticism.

It is not then classifying or comparing that is old and superannuated, but, on the contrary, abstaining from doing so; and what is arbitrary is not to 'distribute prizes' but to wish to be the sole judge, the infallible judge, and the judge beyond appeal of the prizes we award. So act the 'people of society' whose 'taste' takes the place of competence and study, and whom we see deciding on the play or the novel of the day by the prettiness of the things they find to say about it. But Boileau, Boileau himself was even then looking to something more. He knew well that if his taste was good, it was not because it was his own, but on the contrary because it was exterior and superior to his own, and that the object of criticism is to teach men to judge often against their own taste. Do not morality and education also consist, like criticism, in substituting in ourselves other motives of judgment and action than those suggested to us by temperament, instinct, and nature? There is one other observation which I submit to our impressionists. If each of us had the pretension to concede or yield nothing to others,

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

life would be unbearable ; and, similarly, if a work of art were merely the expression of the individuality of the artist, not only criticism but art itself would perish.

Yet judging and classifying are only a beginning, and we must then explain. As to this obligation of criticism, or this function, if you will, which was for Sainte-Beuve the whole of criticism, and which must remain one of its essential parts, shall I say that impressionist criticism does not submit to it any more than to the others? In reality, impressionist criticism does not explain, it states ; and it describes, or it comments, but it does not interpret. I rather fear I know at least one of its motives. It is that if we wished to distinguish what each book and author owe to all those who have preceded them and 'caused' them, so to speak, we would be startled at the smallness of the originality of mankind. We all write, say, a poem, a play, a novel, or an article : and how much do we put into it of ourselves, which is of ourselves and from ourselves, and only of and from ourselves? The explanation, then, is first to be found, or at least to be sought for, everywhere but in ourselves ; and too happy are those whose originality has not disappeared in this very search ! There is another proof, if that is needed, of the existence of objective criticism. The originality of a writer—of M. Zola, for example, or M. Henry Becque—is not defined by reference to himself, which would imply a

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

contradiction ; it is not defined by reference to me, who am doubtless less original than they are ; it is defined by reference to the dramatists or novelists who have preceded them, who have their place in history, and it is defined by reference to the laws they have themselves made of their literary form, which likewise has its place in history.

The foundation of objective criticism is therefore really the same as that of history. Just as there can be no possible doubt or allowable hesitation about the military genius of Napoleon or the political genius of Richelieu, so too there can be none about the unique originality of the comedy of Molière or the tragedy of Racine ; and whoever will treat as a 'scamp' the author of *Andromaque* will act like the simple Lanfrey when he gave lessons on retrospective tactics to the victor of Austerlitz : it is himself he will have judged. But whoever says that one is at liberty to prefer Regnard's comedy to Molière's, the *Distrait* to the *École des Femmes*, and the *Folies amoureuses* to *Tartuffe*, does something much worse still, for he might as well say that there is no reason for placing a living being below or above another in the order of species ; and, along with the foundations of objective criticism, he destroys with the same blow those of natural history. A literary form is, indeed, superior to another, and, in the same form, drama ode or novel, a work is nearer or farther away from the perfection of its form, only from reasons analogous to those which, in the hierarchy

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

of organisms, raise vertebrata above mollusca, for example, and, among the vertebrata, the dog and cat above the ornithorhynchus. Such is the true way of understanding the 'relativity of knowledge'; such is the real way; such is the only way that is not sophistry or pure word-splitting. Had we the 'facet-eye of a fly' or the 'rude and simple brain of an orang-outang,' things might change for us in appearance and meaning; but the relations which would still continue to unite them, and the system formed by these relations, in whatever way, yet always connected, would not suffer change. And hence, since laws are nothing else than the expression of these relations, the result follows that to deny the possibility of objective criticism is to deny the possibility of any science whatever. If there is no objective criticism, no more is there objective natural history, chemistry, or physics. This does not mean that criticism is a science, but that they are connected; and, as it has, like science, a precise object, it can borrow from science methods, processes, and directions.

How then can they have failed to recognise this? There are many reasons, of which I would choose, for the present occasion, only the least unkind, or even the most flattering to our impressionist critics. It is no use for them to write critiques; they all nourish, in their inmost heart, the secret ambition of novelist, dramatist, or poet. So too did Sainte-Beuve, who well knew, since he himself confessed it

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

in so many words, that "the true condition of the critical spirit is to have no *art* of its own"; but who could not refrain, as often as he had to speak of Balzac or Hugo, from considering them from the point of view of *Joseph Delorme* or *Volupté*. It is the same with M. France, M. Lemaître, and M. Paul Desjardins. Even if M. Desjardins, the youngest of the three, were not the author of some novels, his critical articles, the form he habitually gives them, the pleasure he takes in mingling traits which describe or deal with himself but are equally foreign to his subject, would still proclaim the novelist which lies dormant in him. As for M. Lemaître, after having made practically his first appearance with his *Petites Orientales*, if I remember rightly, and after having written some *Contes*, of which there are at least two or three that are charming, he is now attracted by the drama, as all those know who lately applauded his *Révoltée*, and, more recently, his *Député Leveau*. Lastly, to say nothing of the *Noces corinthiennes* or the *Poèmes dorés*, it is not in his criticism, it is in the *Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*, or still more in *Thaïs*, that M. France has put his best. Evidently, if criticism interests all of them, it has never been, and never will be, their principal business; or rather they use it only to experiment with ideas, until they can give them a different and still more personal form, which will some day be the soul of their dramas, poems, or novels.

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

There is nothing more natural. Poet or novelist, what makes the originality of the artist is his impressionist, subjective, or truly personal way of seeing and feeling. Add something to the knowledge we have of common life ; discover in it some unexplored province, if such still exists ; complete, correct, or modify the idea which we have of it, such is the work of the poet, in the most general sense of the term. And here is the work of the artist : he enlarges, develops, perfects the means of his art ; he finds means to render what his art had not yet expressed ; and he adds to it the individuality of his own sensations. The only precaution which, I believe, must then be taken, is, in perfecting the means of the art, not to reduce it entirely to the perfection of the form, as our Parnassians have done, nor to begin by mutilating and calumniating life in some way or other before imitating it, as our naturalists have done. But if the object of criticism is entirely different, do not the merits of the poet and the novelist become for it as many faults ? This fashion of intervening in person may greatly assist the novelty of impressions, but does it not affect justice and truth ? This is what all those believe who—like Villemain and Guizot formerly, like Littré, like Scherer nearer our time, and lastly like M. Taine, who were much more convinced of the relativity of things than our impressionists themselves, and who understood it as it should be understood—have believed no less thoroughly

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

in the existence of objective criticism ; and we believe in it along with them.

I do not know, indeed, if the disadvantages, or even the dangers of this impressionism are evident, and that, in the first place, it would break the bonds which closely unite criticism and history. M. Anatole France, M. Jules Lemaître, M. Paul Desjardins are not merely talented writers. They are also scholars, mandarins, as M. Lemaître says, whose impressions, whatever they be, are determined and caused, more often than they believe, by the literary education they have received. They readily reproach objective criticism that its 'dogmatism' is only the form which it gives to its 'personal preferences.' Yet, among their 'personal preferences,' or what they take for such, there is quite a part of 'dogmatism' which is neither theirs nor of them. It is what they 'know'; and their knowledge preserves them from the trap which impressionism keeps always laid for ignorance. They may therefore prefer *Madame Bovary* to Racine's *Athalie*. In reality, their paradox amuses them ; they admit it in spite of themselves ; and the proof is that they cannot keep from letting something of the truth slip in developing their paradox, and this truth ruins it. But smaller scholars will come in their turn ; they have come already, who will know nothing, who will abstain from reading anything, from fear that their impressions will be taken from them beforehand, and who will con-



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

stitute themselves, none the less, by right of their impressionism, partial judges of matters of intellect. I know more than twenty whom I could name. Literary history would perish first; tradition next, with literary history; and finally, with tradition, the sentiment of solidarity which binds the generations together.

One consequence would follow from this, that criticism, now thus cut off from its connection with history, would lose, at the same time as the notion of its object, the knowledge of its rôle or function. For to say that it has no function or rôle is another error, as we saw that it was wrong, in order to deny its purpose, to exaggerate gratuitously the number, the nature, and the bearing of its contradictions. Its province is to give directions to art; and this may be noted several times in history. With a little exaggeration, but not without some truth, has it not been claimed that modern German literature is the work or the creation of Lessing's criticism? And with us, three times at least within three hundred years, has not criticism directed the evolution of our poetry? Du Bellay, Ronsard himself, and Baïf above all began by being critics as much as poets; Boileau was only that; and who now does not know that romanticism was already clearly present in the *Génie du Christianisme*? If nobody can flatter himself on ever being either Chateaubriand, Boileau, or Ronsard, nobody is forbidden, I think, from trying to follow! them:

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

and, in any case, their example is enough to show what services, and what kind of services, criticism can render. Infatuated as they are to-day with themselves and their *sens propre*, as used to be said, if criticism cannot immediately act on authors, it can act, and acts to some purpose every day, on opinion, of which they are only the expression, when they are not its humble servants. It can take away from them their public, and, by modifying the *milieu*, it can make even the most stubborn change his manner.

Are examples necessary? Has not one of our impressionists, M. Paul Desjardins, somewhere defined naturalism as "the application of the processes of criticism to the literature of the imagination"; and though it is a little narrow, the definition is none the less ingenious and happy. But what I hold as absolutely true in it, is that, without criticism, naturalism would never have had the success it has had. It would be easily proved that the author of *La Bête humaine* and *L'Assommoir* owes almost everything, not to Balzac, nor even to Flaubert, but to M. Taine, to M. Taine's essay on *Balzac*, and to the *History of English Literature*. So too how many times, in his earliest work, when he was as yet the author only of the *Fortune des Rougon* or the *Conquête de Plassans*, did he not complain that M. Taine had abandoned him! *Quare me dereliquisti!* If M. Taine had laid down, in his *History of English Literature*, the principles

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

of naturalism, he had been careful to mark, in his *Philosophy of Art*, the limits which naturalism could not pass without departing from the conditions of art itself. So criticism has not only determined, as we said, the direction of contemporary naturalism, but has also protected it from its own excesses; and so what is best in naturalism—and nobody, I know, denies that there is much good in it—must be laid to the credit of criticism.

The same thing is to be said of the drama. For the last twenty-five or thirty years no work has appeared on the stage which marks an epoch in the history of the art, which is capable of forming a school and inspiring successful imitators. Yet the æsthetics of the drama have completely changed. If there are some of us still who used to praise the ingeniousness, the abundance of resource, the very real ability of Eugène Scribe, how many are we? And what is there, in the eyes of young people, more out of fashion, more artificial, and more false, than *Une Chaîne*, for example, if not *Bertrand et Raton*? There is no more desire for these preparations, these conventions, this confusion or medley of styles. Criticism alone has accomplished this work. It is criticism which asked itself why the drama had remained for thirty or forty years in arrear of the novel. It is criticism which showed the good points in the conventions which the school of Scribe had constituted as so many articles of faith. Better still: among these

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

conventions, it is criticism which labours to separate the necessary from the arbitrary. And, should M. Becque, or someone else, give us one day or other this comedy, doubtless not entirely new, but yet freer and franker, of which we must admit that *La Parisienne* or *Les Corbeaux* are little more than the promise, it is still criticism to which the twentieth century will be indebted.

There, in the present as in all time, is the true function of criticism, which it can evidently fulfil only by escaping from impressionism. If criticism means to act, it must be something else, and something more interesting, than the manifestation of our tastes and preferences, for these, to tell the truth, usually interest only ourselves. Do not M. Lemaître and M. France know that the remnant of authority which it still preserves in the provinces is due to the presence in their judgments of reasons which are not theirs but everybody's? In the same way, when reading the Memoirs or Confessions of others, we think we like what we find similar or applicable to ourselves, while in reality what we seek is a wider, more varied, and deeper knowledge of man in general. So let us admit it with a good grace : let us put something above our tastes ; and since there must be criticism, let us say that there cannot be any that is not *objective*. This is all that I have endeavoured to show in these pages : and I think that to have shown it successfully would not be a matter of indifference,

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

either to the idea which we must hold of criticism, or to the education of the mind, or perhaps to the very future of literature—or to the literature of the future.

Now, as for some dilettanti who ask what is the good of criticism and why we do not do without it, we may be content to reply by asking another question: what is the good also of art, of history, of science? And, indeed, the world would not be changed if the Comédie-Française were to give us this year at least a masterpiece; and since we live very comfortably in an entire ignorance of the nature of Merovingian institutions, we may with stronger reason do without knowing what must be thought of the works of those who have studied them. But I shall add that if criticism is inferior to history and art in so many other respects, it has this advantage or this superiority over art and history that it alone can prevent the world, according to M. Renan's expression, from "being devoured by charlatanism." Too occupied, too diligent, too much a slave to the labour of daily life, unable to analyse its pleasure and recognise the quality of it, the crowd always runs at the call of those who flatter; and the charlatans of art or literature know this well. It is precisely the business of criticism to think and to judge for the crowd. In fixing the rank and distributing its prizes, it is possible it may give certain little philosophers something to laugh at, but it does work doubly useful: it teaches the crowd that there is some difference between

## BRUNETIERE'S ESSAYS

Ponson du Terrail and Balzac, which it is doubtless well to know ; and it avenges talent for the successes of mediocrity, which are humiliating some way or other to everybody. Why, alas, must we end by saying that, if the task has never been more urgent, these latter words make no pretence to perform it ; and that as our fathers might have used them, those who come after us will use them in their turn ; and they will be always true.

## AN APOLOGY FOR RHETORIC

IF, as has been said, there are dead men who must be killed, are there not others from time to time who must be brought to life again, or have at least their memory revived? This is what I was thinking a short time ago while reading the invective of a worthy philosopher against rhetoric, and I asked myself if the time had not come to plead a little the cause of this illustrious victim. For though there is certainly one part of the art of writing which is divine and, as it were, inspired, and which, at once inimitable and incommunicable, is neither to be learned nor transmitted, are there not also humbler parts which can be taught and really have rules and theories? Surely nobody would dare to say that there is no art of singing. The most beautiful voice in the world is little in itself, if it cannot be used and controlled. Why should there not be also an art of speaking or writing? Because rhetoric has been abused, must we condemn its use or despise its utility—its value I shall soon be saying. And because someone has said that “true rhetoric laughs at rhetoric” must we take him at his word? Or shall we hold with another that a man

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

always writes well enough when he succeeds in making himself understood? In this case I do not know the kitchen-maid or stable-boy who does not succeed as well as an academician.

Yes, undoubtedly, if we never spoke but to act, if when we wrote we were guided only by interests superior to ourselves, interests which self-love has never tainted, if we thought only of instructing, or of gaining or converting souls, if we were Pascal—since I have just quoted from him—or Bossuet, or Bourdaloue only, then we could affect to despise rhetoric! We could throw far off its ornaments and artifices. We should have the right to despise, for our speech as for our person, ‘all that men admire.’ And yet, as to Pascal himself, why did he re-write, even as often as seven or eight times, each one of his *Provinciales*?\* And Bossuet, though more disinterested than Pascal, why did he re-write his *Sermons*? Why did he revise so carefully the text of his *Oraisons funèbres* or his *Histoire universelle*? To make sure of its doctrine, I know, and grant; but also that the force of the

\* As it is chiefly Pascal and his saying that are cited against rhetoric, it may be well to reproduce a few lines from Nicole, in his *Histoire des Provinciales*: ‘This letter (the first) had all the success desired. . . . It produced in the minds of all the effect which was expected. *It showed how much the style of writing which Montalte had chosen was fitted to engage the attention of the world in this dispute.* It was plain that it forced in some way or other the dullest and the most indifferent to take an interest in it; *that it stirred them up, that it won them over by enjoyment*; and that, without aiming at giving them vain amusement, it led them pleasantly to the knowledge of the truth.’



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

words should make the ideas more sure of impressing the reader or listener. They did not need to despise rhetoric, for they indulged in it. And though they did not let it take up more place in their work than it should occupy, they indulged in it all the same. They knew 'the power of a word put in its proper place : ' they knew also that of 'harmonious cadence.' As they dealt with men, they captivated them by human methods. Was that not better than estranging them at the outset, for as they had something they wished to tell, should they have begun by discouraging or disgusting them from listening? But how much more is that which is true of those men true of us, I mean of all those writers who are neither apostles nor leaders of souls, who write for their own pleasure perhaps, but also that they may be read, just as the painter aims at being looked at and the musician at being heard. Only those can I forgive for their contempt or disdain of rhetoric who do not print, and never have printed, and will not leave *Memoirs* behind them, who will in fact always keep from writing, even against rhetoric, since we have to use it as soon as we write.

It is true we must come to an understanding on the meaning of the very word *rhetoric*, and this is no easy matter, since it has been distorted from the old sense it still had at the time of Pascal and Bossuet to be made a kind of literary insult. Further, we live at a time when everyone takes the liberty of giving words

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

whatever sense is convenient—without any thought on their signification, their history, or their origin. What is it, for example, that M. Ernest Renan meant to say in the preface to the third volume of his *History of the People of Israel*, when he rather bitterly reproached those who did not see the resemblance between Félix Pyat and the prophet Jeremiah which he finds so amusing with ‘their rhetoricians’ susceptibility’? I suppose he only meant to be unpleasant, for what rhetoric can find a resemblance doubtful, a comparison bad, an allusion unfortunate, and say so very simply. Surely a man can have other ideas on the Prophets than those of M. Renan, and not be a ‘rhetorician’ for that? But when M. Maxime Du Camp in his turn tells us in his *Théophile Gautier* that, along with the verses of Musset, those of Gautier are the only ones which are not ‘tainted with rhetoric,’ what meaning does he attach to it? And what should we? For I would have thought that there was no rhetoric at all, or very little, in *Jocelyn* and the *Destinées*, for example, in the verses of Lamartine and Vigny: but on the other hand I find much, and a good deal more than I would have wished for, in *Albertus* and *Rolla*.

Regrettez-vous le temps où le ciel sur la terre,  
Marchait et respirait dans un peuple de dieux. . . .

Dors-tu content, Voltaire, et ton hideux sourire  
Voltige-t-il encor sur tes os décharnés. . . .

Cloîtres silencieux, voûtes des monastères,  
C'est vous, sombres caveaux, vous qui savez aimer. . . .

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

Who has ever made a greater abuse than Musset of the exclamation, and the apostrophe, and generally all the figures that are catalogued in the treatises of the rhetoricians? But as for Gautier, is it not amusing that anyone should wish to exempt at this day from the reproach of rhetoric him of all our contemporaries who believed most firmly in the power of words, in their peculiar and intrinsic value, exterior and superior to the ideas they express? For fear of losing ourselves among all these contradictions, let us hold by the old definitions, and take the word as it has always been taken from Aristotle to Fénelon. Rhetoric is the body of rules and laws which govern the art of writing, considered in itself as inseparable from the art of thinking: and whether it is known or not, and I rather fear it is not known very well, what one denies in attacking rhetoric is an art of thinking and writing.

In what does it consist? I shall take good care to be vague. I am sure to be asked if I am master of it myself. The joke, it is true, would mean nothing: but I prefer not to give too good occasion for it. Its rules and laws are to be found in all treatises on rhetoric, and Aristotle and Quintilian say some very good things about it, which are as true for us as for the Greeks and Romans. But it will be most interesting perhaps to recall the principles of this art, or rather its reasons, the eternal and solid reasons which will always justify it. Not only is it not such a futile and puerile thing, as it is often said to be, to learn to write, but it is

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

possible that it may be essential. Brought to birth at an early date, and almost contemporary in its origin with Greek literature, rhetoric should undoubtedly answer, and I believe it does, to some general interior and profound need of literature and humanity.

“We show too little esteem of the public if we do not take the trouble of preparation when dealing with it. And a man who would appear in a night-cap and a dressing-gown on a day of ceremony would not commit a greater incivility than he who exposes to the light of the world things which are good only in private or in conversations only with intimate friends or valets.” So says Balzac somewhere, the other Balzac, the one whom Sainte-Beuve preferred for quite personal reasons—and who, as he has so well said, had actually made French prose learn its rhetoric. How many people would not write, if they were made, if they could be made, before writing, to think over this lesson of old politeness! How many *Memoirs* and *Journals* and *Confessions* would literature have the luck to be rid of, if we could distinguish for ourselves what is suitable only for our ‘intimate friends’ and our ‘valets’—if we have them—and what is worth being exposed ‘to the light of the world’! This is the first principle of all rhetoric. A man writes and speaks for himself, but also for others, and assuredly we should neither sacrifice nor disguise for them what we believe to be justice and truth, but should present these in a manner which does not jar too rudely on their ears, their habits, or

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

their prejudices. Is it not thus—I think it is worth the passing remark—that our classical literature has grown and developed? I refer no longer to Balzac. But we may be sure that the author of the *Provinciales*, had he not taken pains to win society at once to his side, would never have succeeded in insinuating into the minds of his time something of the severity of Jansenist morality. And in truth, the means he chose was excellent rhetoric, but it was rhetoric all the same.

Let us remember, in fact, that literature, like art in general, has really a function—I am tempted to say a social mission. This is the profound meaning of the ancient myths, which gave eloquence a place at the beginning of civilisations or even of societies. Do we not know, moreover, that if great peoples anywhere awake to a full consciousness of what they are, it is in their literature? And, divided as we are by all sorts of means, by our interests or our passions, is it not literature still that ever re-establishes a solidarity, which on the other hand the attraction of selfish pleasure and the hardness of the struggle for life perpetually tend to dissolve? An ode or an elegy, a drama or a novel, work only on the reader, if I may say so, according as they awaken or produce in him ‘states of mind’ which are like those of the novelist or the dramatist or the poet. The knowledge of these states of mind, of their most general and human qualities, and consequently the art

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

or science of the means to induce them, is what the ancient rhetoricians called the 'topic.' We may change the word if it is too Greek, too pedantic, too uncouth for us nowadays : but the thing remains the same. A little of the 'topic' would have prevented Corneille from writing his *Théodore*, his *Pertharite*, or his *Attila*. It would prevent our contemporary novelists from taking particular and exceptional and morbid states of the human mind as ordinary and general states. At least, in describing them they would know how to connect them with these less exceptional states of which they are only an aberration. Further, each of us would undoubtedly give less play to his private feelings ; and what would be the effect on literature I do not know, though in mixing itself up with the life of the world it would assuredly come nearer its true aim. It would be thought no longer that originality consists in being like nobody else, but only in describing a personal experience of the world and life. And this would still be rhetoric, and I venture to say that it would be good and excellent rhetoric.

Here, perhaps, is a more important consideration. Examine it closely enough and it will be seen that what is really attacked under the name of rhetoric is all the means for urging on men things which are not to be proved. Liberty, and immortality, and even morality cannot be proved : they are to be urged. We cannot establish the necessity of obedience, or of

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

self-control, or of self-sacrifice ; but we can incline our hearts to them. This is what those people cannot tolerate who, as they say, believe only in what can be proved. So they include indifferently under the name of rhetoric—with a disdain mingled with a certain amount of anger—all they fear may embarrass or contradict their own convictions. Rhetoric they see in a *Provinciale* of Pascal ! Rhetoric, in a sermon of Bossuet, on the *Honneur du monde* or the *Haine des hommes contre la vérité* ! Rhetoric, in a *Discours* of Rousseau, in his *Contrat social* or his *Profession de foi du Vicaire savoyard* ! Rhetoric, in the *Génie du Christianisme* or in the *Essai sur l'Indifférence* ! And rhetoric, generally, in all they feel to oppose, not the truth—since it escapes us, alas, in all these matters—but the ideas or principles with which, in default of the truth, and by their own necessities, they have decided to comply. As for me, I know no finer praise of rhetoric : and the more I think of it, the more it seems to me that there precisely is its forte, as well as the hidden reason of the severe attacks to which it is exposed.

Yes, where the power of logic and dialectic ends, there begins the power of rhetoric. Where reasoning wanders, and reason even blanches, there does it come and found its empire. It lays hold of an entire province of the human mind, not the least vast and inaccessible, and impenetrable to the demonstrations of erudition and the inductions of metaphysics ; it establishes itself there, and reigns in sovereign

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

sway. "Tell me," asked Cicero, at the beginning of one of his treatises on rhetoric, which contain passages which are worth all his speeches, "tell me how would men ever have been able to bend their minds to the observation of uprightness and justice: how would they have consented to yield their wishes to those of their fellows: how would they have been persuaded to make a common cause of the common interest, and in this interest to sacrifice at need even their life, if it had not been by the aid and means of persuasion and eloquence and rhetoric?" And indeed, uprightness, charity, justice, virtue, love of country, all the sentiments that give the society of men its value, and bring it about that not even instinct, which is always selfish, but even reason, which is always calculating, can dissuade us—it is this, it is eloquence and rhetoric which make them touch the heart, which lend them a voice and gesture, which make them speak, if I may say so, to their very bodies. Such is the origin of their 'figures,' the aim of their 'movements,' the explanation of their power. In materialising what can be neither seen nor touched, rhetoric makes them real motives, or rather springs of action. The rhetoricians of the sixteenth century brought about the Reformation, and the rhetoricians of the eighteenth the Revolution, and these perhaps are great enough things—whatever else may be thought of them. For they acted, in their character of rhetoricians, at those times when mighty resolves were afoot, and their power was



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

as if inherent in what is deepest in human nature. We do not live by bread, and algebra, and exegesis alone, but by every word that comes from the heart of our fellows and penetrates to ours. If rhetoric is the art of giving this word its value—and this is a definition which I think will hold—neither logic nor dialectics would ever prevail against it : and, instead of complaining that this is so, it seems to me that we should rather consider it a matter for congratulation.

For it matters not that it can be put to a bad use. What cannot be misused? *Corruptio optimi pessima est.* If rhetoric had less that made for good, it would have less that made for evil : and then is science, which is opposed to it, so sure of having produced nothing but good? It would be an easy matter to show its error if it believed so ; and humanity has paid dearly for more than one service that we owe to the learned. But, what is more certain still, a demonstration has never triumphed over a sentiment ; and therefore if there is a bad rhetoric, all that we can do against it, is to oppose to it a better. A speech, if I may say so, can be answered only by a speech, and a sermon by a sermon — Demosthenes against Æschines, Bossuet against Calvin—and why may I not go the length of saying that prosopopeia is to be answered only by hypotyposis, and metonymy only by synecdoche? Or, in other terms, truth is not to be substituted in our hearts for error, but one belief for another belief,

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

one sentiment for another, a stronger wish for a gentler wish, a more persuasive motive of acting for a more careless and sluggish one. So to proscribe rhetoric under the pretext of the evils which it has caused and the abuse which may be made of its examples and lessons, would be, I think, and perhaps it is evident, only to disarm it against itself. We have need of it against itself. Since it answers to a necessity of human nature, we must resign ourselves to it: and, if I have clearly explained my meaning, this necessity is the most imperative of all—more imperative indeed than the need of knowledge and understanding—since it is the necessity of acting.

Someone will tell me, I know, that I here confound rhetoric with eloquence. I should like him then to be kind enough to tell me what is the difference. For, be it Demosthenes, Cicero, or Bossuet, I hardly know the orator who has not been accused of declamation, and I have even observed that a different way of thinking is generally sufficient to give rise to this accusation. Bossuet, for example, is a rhetorician for Voltaire in his *Discours sur l'Histoire universelle*, but not for the author of the *Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*; and let him preach his *Sermon sur l'Unité de l'Église*, and he becomes a rhetorician again for the author of *Le Pape* and *L'Église gallicane*. That is to say that the only difference between an orator and a rhetorician consists in the soundness of what they say; and as this soundness has not,

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

and never can have, any place but in the opinion of their audience, the difference is evidently not very great. If, however, we were to take rhetoric in its narrowest sense, and, by sacrificing substance to form, were to accept the definition given by those who despise it most, there would be no lack of arguments, both numerous and decisive, for a reply, and of these I shall select only one.

Is language an organism? It is said to be so, and I cannot say, though I rather think it is not; but what it is assuredly, what it becomes as soon as it is used for anything else than the needs of daily life, is a work of art. *Die Sprache als Kunst*: the title of this book pleases me. What colours and lines are in the plastic arts, or sounds also in music, words are in a language, and, with stronger reason, the figures, the turns, the arrangement of the parts of the sentence. There are beautiful words which sound well to the ear, and there are disgusting words which offend and wound it and fill the imagination with vulgar or impure ideas. Do I say words? It should be syllables, a simple combination of consonants and vowels. As many examples as can be wished for will be found in the slang dictionaries. Can that art be possibly considered contemptible or only indifferent which endeavours to avoid these encounters or concourses of sounds, these words of the gaol or the convict prison, and, though it cannot always entirely avoid them, at least does all it can to dis-

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

guise them? If, as Pascal says, "the mere tone of voice changes the aspect of a poem or speech," are not accent, turn, and movement enough to modify the meaning of a sentence? By merely changing the order of the words of a sentence, what was obscure becomes clear; what was heavy, light and lively; what was rude and cacophonous, rhythmical and harmonious. And were not metaphors, long before they became 'ornaments of speech,' the means and natural process of the development and fructification, so to speak, of languages? It is imagination which finds them; but if rhetoric is the art of using imagination, of not confounding an antithesis with a similitude, if, above all, it teaches us when and how imagination is to be used, to what extent, and for the expression of what ideas and sentiments, who can fail to see that, taken even in this its narrowest sense, rhetoric always and necessarily leads from the art of writing to that of thinking?

I would really make out too good a case were I to care to show that it is also the art of composing. To order one's thoughts, to regulate their development according to their importance, to pass from one to the other by imperceptible transitions, to adjust the turn of their movements to something less capricious than our humour—it is this that some very great writers have been unable to do for want of a little rhetoric, a Montesquieu, for example, and a Chateaubriand. Are they less great on that

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

account, may be asked. No: but I do not think they are any greater; and the *Esprit des Lois* and the *Génie du Christianisme* are, by the very faults of their composition, the one less clear and intelligible, and the other less persuasive and conclusive. If, moreover, none of us can flatter ourselves on being Chateaubriand or Montesquieu, we have undoubtedly good reason to let their faults alone, for these can be covered or excused only by equal or similar qualities. In the meantime we run no risk, if there is an art of composing, and if it can be taught, in learning it. And further let us note that this class of rules contains in itself the very means of dispensing with them, if need be. To know what must not be done is one part of justice, and an extensive enough part, since the codes of every country turn on it. Rhetoric in like manner teaches us what must be neither written nor said. But it teaches us also what must be done; and though it may not follow that we can do it, I really do not see that there is any harm in trying.

Let us remember, in short, that it is these despised and much-mocked rhetoricians, these sworn weighers of words and syllables, these 'recorders' of usage, these virtuosos in the art of fine speech, these leaders of fashion, a Balzac, a Vaugelas, the *précieuses* even, La Bruyère, Fénelon too, Voltaire above all, a Rollin, a Rivarol—and how many others?—it is they who have made our French prose the supple and pliant, the keen and delicate, the wonderful instrument it

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

is—or was. This higher rhetoric which is to be found, when sought for, in the writings of a Chateaubriand or a Rousseau, a Bossuet or a Pascal, they have set forth clearly in these writings and put within our reach. Nobody knew what the natural style was: Pascal appeared and revealed it, and all its merits were recognised immediately. But it is the rhetoricians who have examined wherein this natural style consists, and whether any of its secrets may be stolen from the author of the *Provinciales*, and it is they who have pointed out the methods of the idiosyncrasies of Pascal, if I may say so, and enriched the language by them. If on the other hand, in another writer, the author of the *Petit Carême*, for example, there are too many useless ornaments, too great a desire to please, too many pretty things, and generally more thought about himself than his subject—which may well be the very definition of bad rhetoric—it is still the rhetoricians who have informed us against him, who have unveiled his artifice, who have made us feel the abuse of rhetoric in the use of these very processes. I cannot believe that they have here done us such a bad service; and if any one were to follow in their footsteps, I do not think that he would waste his time.

There is no doubt that some people have thought of it, since we can no longer recognise, under the diversity of words, the similarity of things. Granted that rhetoric is a legacy of the past—which

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

is sufficient with some people to discredit it—we set no value on rhetoricians, but quite a particular one on stylists. Yet did Gautier not indulge in rhetoric—and very bad rhetoric, to say so in passing—when he wrote his *Capitaine Fracasse*? Did he not keep open school of rhetoric when he repeated one of his favourite sayings: “I am very strong. I score five hundred on the dynamometer, and *I do not mix metaphors.*” The advice has actually been followed so well, that open your journals and you will see that the sole measure of a writer’s style is not the justness but the unity of his metaphors.\* A mixed metaphor! Send the culprit back to school! Nobody remembers that one of the chief characteristics of affectation and preciosity of style is precisely this unity of the metaphors. But what really is the newly published correspondence of Flaubert but a course of rhetoric, in which I very willingly admit there are some most excellent lessons? Here is one which it seems to me to the point to quote:

“We are surprised at the worthy fellows of the age

\* TRISSOTIN.

Pour cette grande *faim* qu’à mes yeux on expose,  
Un *plat* seul de huit vers me semble peu de chose,  
Et je pense qu’ici je ne ferai pas mal,  
De joindre à l’épigramme ou bien du madrigal.  
Le *ragoût* d’un sonnet qui, chez une princesse,  
A passé pour avoir quelque délicatesse,  
Il est de *sel attique assaisonné* partout,  
Et vous le trouverez, je crois, d’assez bon *goût*.

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

of Louis XIV, but they were not men of enormous genius—and I know four at least in whom we are mistaken—but what conscientiousness! How they force themselves to find just expressions for their thoughts! What work! What consultations with one another! What a knowledge of Latin! How slowly they read! And all their thought is expressed: the form is full, crammed and stuffed till it almost cracks.” Is this rhetoric or not? I do not say it is of the finest—there is hardly a word less suitable for Flaubert—but is it not good, and almost of the best?

If, however, these considerations, though somewhat summary, should not succeed in disarming or influencing certain disdainful adversaries, others may be offered which are more utilitarian, and very erudite at the same time. They may be asked why the Romans and Greeks cultivated rhetoric so passionately. I do not see what they can possibly answer but that, in the republics of antiquity, speech was a weapon, and whoever wished to act had to know how to handle it or fence with it. In Athens as in Rome, he who could not speak not only was unable to defend himself but had to be almost invariably in the *clientèle* or political household of a superior in eloquence. Read Fénelon on this point, in his *Letter to the Academy*. For us then who live to-day under the government of speech, of whom it may be said that our daily interests are at the mercy of an oration, or the impos-



## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

sibility of replying to it, it is necessary to learn to speak, and, like the Greeks or Romans, we have more need of rhetoric than our fathers had. We have need of it even to retort to or, as used to be said, to take the edge off that of our adversaries. But if I were to insist on this argument, I might mix up, in a question so far entirely literary, certain reasons which are less so, and which it is sufficient to have indicated. After all, the greatest enemies of rhetoric are perhaps those also of government by speech: the liberty they like is dumb, and the right they vindicate so energetically for others is that of being silent.

There is another reason which seems to me still stronger, and with it I shall end. Rhetoric has now for a few years been deleted from our programme of secondary education, to be replaced by the vague 'notions on literary history,' and, if I may once dare to take the liberty of speaking for myself, it is not I who would complain that something was being done for literary history. It is well to know on leaving school that the elder Corneille, for example, did not mean to flatter Louis XIV in his *Cinna*, under the name of Augustus. This was not known till quite recently. Rhetoric is one good thing, and chronology is another, and, may I say so, is one of my passions. But since there is now much talk of the establishment of a school of French Classics, it does not seem useless to express the wish that rhetoric will there retake its natural place; and it

## BRUNETIÈRE'S ESSAYS

may be as well for me to give the principal reason. It is that our classical literature—and not merely its prose, but also its poetry—is essentially oratorical. “The spoken word,” said Vaugelas in the Preface to his *Remarques sur la langue française*, “is the first in order and dignity, since the written word is only its image, as it itself is the image of the thought;” and from Malherbe to Buffon at least, to Chateaubriand and even to Guizot, I can think only of a few story writers whose style of writing does not verify this principle. And we know, too, the attention the author of *Madame Bovary* paid to the harmony of the sentence. What does this mean but that for two or three hundred years our greatest writers have not *seen* but *heard* themselves write. To dispel much of the cavilling at the style of Molière, we have only not to be content with running over his plays with our eyes, but to go and see them played or to read them aloud. Now, without a little rhetoric, how can we interpret such a literature? Would we not lose half of the profit to be drawn from it? We would only be forgetting, as it were, to light our lantern. Try to *explain* Racine’s *Andromaque* or *Britannicus* without insisting on that *irony* which is one of his favourite means of shading his thought, and of which he apparently meant to exhaust every turn! Or try to show the unique characteristic of the *Sermons* of Bossuet without pointing out their superiority to those of Bourdaloue, and be successful without the help of

## IN FRENCH LITERATURE

rhetoric ! We may be assured that without rhetoric the school of French Classics will at once degenerate into a school of facts, and this is certainly not what is wanted—or at least promised. This reason alone would have been sufficient to lead me to undertake the defence of this despised creature. I hope, however, that the reader will approve of the other reasons, and that, on joining all together, he will be willing to agree with us that there are decidedly some of the dead that must be brought to life again.

THE END







1/9

PQ 139 .B65  
Brunetiere, Ferdinand, 18  
Brunetiere's essays in French

010101 000



0 1163 0239468 3  
TRENT UNIVERSITY

PQ139 .B65  
Brunetiere, Ferdinand, 1849-1906.  
Brunetiere's essays in French  
literature.

21 AUG 70

3608.10

